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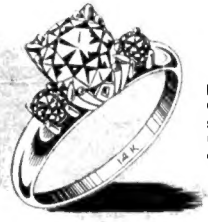

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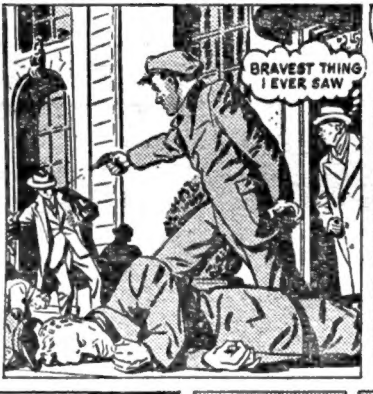

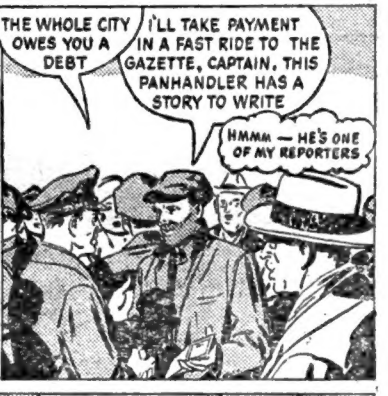
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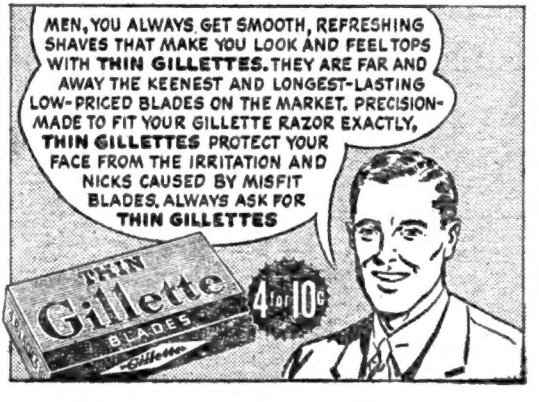
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Volume Forty-One | July, 1948 | Number Two

Rollicking Novel of the Rockies

NEVER KISS AN OUTLAW! ..... **Robert Turner** **6**
Saucy Nina forgot that motto—when a devil-may-care badman started his whirlwind kiss-campaign.

Two Romantic Old-West Novelettes

CALL OF THE WITCH GODDESS ..... **Marian O'Hearn** **44**
Jack was Libbie's dream of what an hombre should be—but his dream was exotic Lyama.

MOONLIGHT AND THE LADY REBEL ..... **Bill Severn** **82**
Merilee gaily played cheek-to-cheek with the Union officer—to protect her guerrilla sweetheart.

Four Short Stories of Frontier Love

CUTE, DARK AND SCANDALSOME ..... **Diane Austin** **24**
Trying to hook a nonchalant sheriff, Cleo fished up a peck of trouble.

THE KISSIN' OF A SHY 'UN ..... **Val Gendron** **36**
Mary Ellen's honkatonk charms had Roger runnin'—the wrong way.

NO CUDDLIN' FOR A SIREN ..... **Isabel Stewart Way** **62**
Rosita's beau kept their fiesta date—and brought along his fiancee!

STORE-BOUGHTEN BRIDEGROOM ..... **Ruby la Verte Thomson** **72**
Kitty learned that hired husbands are a fiddlefoot lot—and very fond of kissing.

Features and Departments

PIN-UP GIRL ..... **A Contest** **23**
Here's star-totin' pulchritude and a limerick prize.

QUEEN OF THE DANCE ..... **The Editor** **43**
Romantic preview of "Fiesta Kisses Are Sweetest" by Marian O'Hearn.

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK ..... **Myrtle Juliette Corey** **61**
Tempting desserts to please that gent with a sweet tooth.

PONY EXPRESS ..... **A Department** **70**
For a mailbag full of letters—just write the lively pen pals.

MAKE YOUR OWN RANCH CLOTHES ..... **A Department** **80**
Keep cool all summer in these fresh, lovely styles.

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NEVER KISS

Romantic Novel of the Rockies

By Robert Turner

CHAPTER ONE

♥ ♥ ♥

Cherry-Red Lips

IT WAS a typical midwinter afternoon. Outside the lonely Bald Crow Mountain stage station, Nina Williams could hear wind whistling and screaming through the scrub pine. All day long, snow had been in the air and a blizzard threatening. But Nina didn't mind. Here in the huge, log-walled main room of the station, close to the great, roaring log fire, Nina felt cozy and protected. Even though Leo Hudson was squatted down on the bearskin rug, only arms reach away from her.

The crackling, popping flames spread a warm glow over Nina. It made her cheeks and ears feel pleasantly flushed and hot. It made her feel delightfully drowzy and dreamy and relaxed.

The friendly flames did more than that,

Nina fumed: "You think you're very clever—you crook!"

AN OUTLAW!

Saucy Nina's lonesome blues turned into dizzy blushes —when a big, bold bank robber warmly demonstrated a honkatonk queen's tips on kissin' . . . on Nina.

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

too. Their light tinted Nina's already healthy and lovely complexion with a becoming, rosy blush. It put reddish highlights in the long, clean sweep of chestnut colored hair that caped her shoulders. It shadowed the folds of the plain little calico housedress she wore so that the boldly curving lines of her young body were more clearly delineated.

Then those flames turned prankish. They suddenly decided that things were too quiet and tame, and that it was a shame for a young man and woman to sit there near the warm, cozy intimacy of the fire and not do anything about it. A knot in a burning log popped, and an infinitesimal spark flew out and landed on the soft round flesh of Nina's bare upper arm.

"Ouch!" she cried. She reached up and rubbed the spot where the spark had stung her.

Instantly Leo Hudson, murmuring sympathetically, scrounged his heavy, muscular figure over close to Nina. He bent his handsome, heavy-featured face close, searching for sign of the injury.

"I don't think it burned you badly," he said. "Does it hurt?"

"For a second it stung like a bee-bite," Nina said. "But it's all right now."

Suddenly Leo Hudson lowered his head and whispered: "I'll make it all better for you, darlin'." Then she felt his warm lips press hard on her arm. She felt the slight tickling of his mustache on her smooth, sensitive skin. An exciting little chill took her, and she had to hunch her shoulders.

She drew in a deep breath as Leo's lips moved along her arm toward her shoulder, and her eyes got bright and shiny. She put her hand on his thick, black hair, tangling her fingers into it.

"Leo, Leo," she murmured. "What am I going to do with you? You shouldn't have stayed on here. You should have gone on with your journey when the stage left two days ago. If—if I'd not expected the Cap'n back long before this, I wouldn't have *let* you stay."

"Why?" Leo slipped his arm around her waist and pressed his mouth against the gentle curve at the side of her smooth throat. "Why, sweetheart? Don't you like me at all?"

"Sure, Leo, but you haven't given me a moment's peace. You haven't been a good boy at all. Stealing kisses every time you can catch me by surprise—"

"Don't hooraw me, honey!" he whispered into her ear, his breath hot and tickling there. "You liked those kisses. You've liked having me here with you. You're just nervous because the two of us have been alone. Why don't you relax, Nina? You know I'm crazy about you!"

She hugged his head close to her, and an anticipative, sort of triumphant expression formed on her pert and pretty features. This was the point she'd been leading Leo up to for the past two days. She'd begun to think he'd never make it.

"HOW do I know that, Leo?" she asked. "How do I know that I'm not just a passing fancy, and that when the next stage comes you won't just pull up stakes and leave me flat? After all, Leo, you're a man of the world, and I'm just the stage-station owner's daughter, who's never been away from this mountain top, lonesome and innocent and—"

"And so beautiful," he finished for her. "I'll prove to you that you're not just a passing fancy, Nina. I—I'm asking you to become my wife. Will you marry me, Nina?"

She felt his arm tighten about her waist. He half turned her around toward him. Hesitantly she brought her hands up between them, put them flat against his chest, holding him away from her. Beneath her fingers she could feel the muscular fullness of his deep chest, the pounding of his heart. The pressure of his hand against the hollow of her spine, was making her weak. She didn't know long she could hold Leo off.

"Maybe—maybe that's just talk, Leo," she said desperately. "Maybe you're just sayin' you want to marry me because—well—there's nobody else here to hear you. Maybe later you would pretend to forget, or swear that you'd never asked me."

Even as she said that, Nina Williams wondered why she was hesitating. This was a moment she'd dreamed of for so long. For the past couple of years, ever since she'd become fully grown, the lonesomeness of this outpost stage station had

been driving her loco. Especially with her father, old Cap'n Williams, away so much.

She'd been just waiting for some nice, handsome and obviously well-to-do young man to come along and propose to her. And Leo Hudson, the young shipbuilder, seemed to be all of those things. She couldn't understand her own reticence.

"How come you stayed on here when your stage left, anyhow, Leo?" she asked.

His mustache was tickling her ear now, the pressure of the arm around her was doing all kinds of strange and almost frightening things to her. She wanted Leo to stop and yet she didn't.

Against her ear, he whispered breathlessly: "I've told you a dozen times, honeychild. I stayed because of *you!*"

"Are you sure it wasn't because of those ship's lamps the Cap'n has decorated the place with?" she asked, stalling a little longer. "You've been all-fired interested in them, I must say. You've done nothing but ask questions about them."

"Sure I'm interested in them. I explained that, too, Nina, sweet. They look just like the lamps that were on a ship that I built that was later lost at sea. The lettering on one of them—even though part of it is rubbed out—almost proves that they came from the *Albatross*.

"Naturally, I'm curious. This whole quaint stage station fascinates me. I'd like to talk with your father when he gets back. Perhaps I can help him renovate the whole place into a replica of a sailing ship. The curiosity value of having an inn, built like a ship that had been left high and dry on a mountain top, would be tremendous. Your father would get a lot of business. You and I could stay right here after we're married, and I could help your father do the work."

Nina let him crush her close to him. Her head fell back, and she closed her eyes, knowing that the fire-glow caused her long lashes to throw intriguing shadows onto her cheeks.

"I don't know what to say to you, Leo," she murmured. "Maybe the Cap'n won't let me marry you. He—he's a funny old codger."

"Nonsense!" he corrected. "I can talk his language if he's an old sea captain. We'll get along famously."

Nina started to say something, but instantly her thoughts were scattered as she felt Leo's mouth suddenly swoop to her throat. His lips were warm and tingling against the tiny pulse that pounded in the sensitive region just below her jawline. A million shivers and chills chased up and down her spine, prickling the soft flesh of her arms and legs, playing hob with her emotions and the self-control she'd been fighting to keep.

The last lucid thought she had before his burning kisses traveled from her throat to her mouth was that Leo had won. She would have to say yes to him, now. She couldn't help herself. Everything was conspiring to make it come out that way—the aching loneliness she'd known for so long, the fact that her father was late in coming back from his trip and that the next stage, already overdue, hadn't arrived yet. . . .

NINA'S heart sang "Yes, yes!" to Leo's proposal, but she wasn't able to come right out and tell him. Her lips were far too busy. This was the first time Leo had really kissed her—or any man for that matter. When other men who had stopped at the station, rough-bearded mountain trappers and stage drivers, had tried to steal a kiss, she had fought them off like a spitting, clawing little bobcat.

At first, she had tried to fight Leo, too. But he'd been so smooth and gentle about it that she'd been forced to relent. And in the two days that he'd been here, she'd gradually come to welcome his attentions. She'd begun to tease him some and let him slip his arm about her waist for a moment and brush his lips against her cheek, or kiss the palm of her hand so that it tickled. But this. . . .

Under the compelling strength of Leo's embrace, with the warm, expert pressure of his lips sending electric shocks of delight all through her, Nina felt deliciously dizzy and light-headed—as she'd felt when she was a child and used to whirl herself around and around. Only this sensation, of course, was a thousand times more intense. She suddenly wished that this moment would go on and on into eternity.

But that wish wasn't granted. Through the rushing roar of her own blood in her ears, Nina suddenly heard another sound.

This was a familiar one that she knew well. It was a rumbling and clanking accompanied by the squeaking of unoiled wheels. It was the arrival of the midweek stage from the coast.

She struggled and broke her lips away from Leo's still eager and demanding kiss. She came spiraling back down to earth, but her voice was still husky and breathless with emotion as she said: "Please, Leo! Stop! It—it's the stage. They'll be comin' in any second."

His hand fell away from the hollow of her spine, and it was as though he had thus released some control inside of her and her strength flowed back. She twisted away, and her hands fluttered to adjust her wrinkled dress and pat errant brown locks of hair back into place.

Leo stood up, too, growling under his breath at the stage and everybody riding it, for choosing such an inopportune moment to arrive.

And then the door of the stage station burst open, and a blast of wind and snow whirled in. In the glow of light from the big copper ship's lamps that decorated each side of the door, Nina saw four people step into the room.

Two men came in first and stomped snow from their boots, swishing off their hats and banging them against their thighs. Their breath blew out in little steam clouds. Behind them was a woman and another man. But Nina didn't pay much attention to them.

One of the first two men to enter was a terribly tall and wide-shouldered young man in a faded and tattered great coat. The light from the lamps shimmered across hair that was a mass of tightly curled, yellow-gold ringlets. In striking contrast to that hair, his brows were very dark and finely shaped. Beneath them, piercing, flame-blue eyes, shadowed by the longest black lashes Nina had ever seen on a man, regarded her with a bold, direct stare that seemed to look right into her brain. He had a lean, long face that was good looking in an exciting, reckless and hard-bitten way that told you that, despite the long lashes and yellow, curly hair, here was a man!

"Good evenin'," Nina managed. She meant it for all those who had just arrived on the stage, but somehow it seemed as though she was speaking to the handsome, blond young man and to him alone. "You made it here just in time, I reckon."

The stranger's daring blue eyes suddenly flicked over her from head to toe. Under that sweeping and somehow admiring appraisal, Nina's hands again nervously adjusted her frock and trailing locks of chestnut-colored hair. She felt blood rushing to cheeks still flushed from the excitement of Leo Hudson's kiss.

From Nina, the stranger's bright glance darted swiftly to Leo and then back to her. "By the look o' things," he said in a deep, vibrant voice, "I'd say we surely did arrive in the nick o' time, ma'am."

Nina dropped her eyes, gestured nervously with her hands. "I—I mean on account of the snow," she said hastily. "I—I meant for your sake."

"Did you, now?" A mocking smile lit up his good-looking face. Nina couldn't help noticing the even whiteness of his teeth against the firm, full line of his mouth. "What makes you think *I'd* care what was happenin' here just before the stage pulled in?"

Nina's eyes widened. She tossed her head proudly, clasped her hands in front of her. Her eyes flashed angrily. "What do you mean?"

The grin twisted crookedly on his lips. A little laughing sound sprang from his throat. "Come, come, honey. Don't you reckon an old-timer at the game o' hearts like m'self can tell by lookin' at a pretty gal that she's just been soundly kissed? Ma'am, a gal gets those cherry-red lips and that warm and flustered look only one way!"

CHAPTER TWO

Owlhoot Kiss-Thief

BEFORE Nina could reply, Leo Hudson stepped out of the shadows and started toward the door, his big shoulders bunched, his fists balled at his sides. "Mister," he said belligerantly, "you ain't got any call to come bustin' in here and insultin' a lady. Apologize, pronto, before I knock that smirkin' grin right off your face!"

Angry color came into the blond man's

high cheekbones. His lips flattened and the blue eyes became suddenly dangerous looking. But the man standing next to him quickly stepped between him and Leo Hudson. He put out his right hand, fingers against Leo's chest, and held him off.

"Take it lightly, son," he growled. "You cain't pick on a man when he's in irons and can't defend himself."

"It's all right, sher'ff," the blond man put in. "I don't reckon I'll need more than one hand."

Both Leo Hudson and Nina glanced in surprise at the great clumsy handcuffs that bound the sheriff's wrist to the blond young man's.

"Back off, mister," the sheriff told Leo Hudson. "You fixin' to nip off more than you can chaw. Happens this here prisoner o' mine is Mitch Brewster, the train robber. He's killed more dam' men than you got fingers and is one o' the orneriest, fightin'est critters I ever run in. With one hand, even, he'd likely tear you into tatters."

Leo Hudson backed off, his heavy, underthrust jaw sagging, his cheeks paling under their dark stain of beard. "Train robber!" he gulped. He looked down at the handcuffs. "Well, of—of course, I don't figure to make trouble on a man in irons who can't defend himself. Don't like to dirty my hands on any of the owlhoot clan, anyhow."

"I'll remember that," Brewster said.

Looking at Mitch Brewster, knowing that he was a dangerous outlaw, the strangest feeling came over Nina Williams. She knew that she should snub him, that here was a man no girl should let herself look at twice. It was ridiculous. He was a criminal who had stolen and killed. He would be hanged, most likely, when he and the sheriff reached their destination. He was no good.

And yet she couldn't seem to keep her eyes away from him. Just to look at him produced some of the pleasant, tingling sensations that she had known when Leo Hudson was kissing her. The fact that he was a dangerous outlaw somehow seemed to make him fascinating. And she felt a little sorry for him, too. This was probably the last stop he would make before. . . .

"If you'll come over to the desk, sheriff, you and—and Mr. Brewster," she said abruptly, "I'll assign you to your rooms and set to fixin' some dinner."

Some of the hardness left Mitch Brewster's face, and he smiled at her. The way his eyes held hers for a moment, the bold warmth of his smile, seemed to turn Nina's heart over and over. Her legs suddenly felt weak.

Then the other people behind the sheriff and his prisoner, who had been standing in the shadows all this time, stepped forward into the light. One was the stage driver, a bandy-legged, bearded oldster, loaded down with luggage. The other was a blonde woman. She was wearing a glamorous black velvet cape and silk kerchief over her head. As she stepped all the way into the room, she whisked the kerchief off and with a graceful, dramatic gesture, unhooked the cape from about her neck and swung it off of her shoulders.

She posed there for a moment, a tall and full-figured woman, about five years older than Nina. She wore her brass-colored blonde hair piled high in a shimmering, stylish coiffure. Large emerald earrings, shaped like hearts, dangled from her ears.

She was pretty in a rouged and slightly dissipated sort of way, Nina saw, with her heavy-lidded, lazy-looking blue eyes and full, curving lips. She was wearing a smart, dark-blue traveling suit, of the richest-looking material Nina had ever seen. And the way the subtle tailoring of its lines accentuated the woman's figure almost made Nina blush.

THE blonde woman placed one hand on a full hip and swayed sinuously. A roguish smile dimpled her cheeks.

"A hell of a note," she cried in a bold, contralto voice. "Lovey Lewis, honkatonk queen of all 'Frisco, unloads her torso from a long stagecoach run and what does she find? Nobody payin' the slightest attention, they're so busy fightin' over a little school girl in calico and an innocent smile. . . . No offense, honey. Lovey's glad to make your acquaintance."

The old stage driver set the baggage down near the small registry desk at the

back of the big room. "I'm bone-tired, Nina," he said. "Gonna take m' usual room and catch some shut-eye." He waddled off toward the stairway leading to the second-floor rooms.

Then Nina saw Lovey Lewis walking toward Leo Hudson. She heard her say: "Leo, you handsome hyena, what are you doin' out here in the wilderness?—as if I didn't know. What's the matter? You goin' to high-hat your old friend, Lovey?"

Leo Hudson, his face flaming, tried to back away from the big blonde woman. But she reached out and caught his shirt front, pulling him toward her. She enfolded him in her long arms and kissed him full and hard on the mouth.

For a moment, Leo was taken by surprise. His arms went around Lovey and he seemed to be returning her kiss quite enthusiastically. The next moment, he seemed to realize suddenly what was going on and broke away, gasping for breath.

Lovey Lewis laughed and cocked her head at Nina. "You see that, honey?" she cried. "When I kiss them, they stay kissed. What about it, Leo?"

Leo Hudson shook his head, seemingly unable to find his voice. Nina stared at them both. She had never seen such a shocking exhibition. In the books and magazines she had read—and from what the Cap'n had taught her—ladies were never so bold, nor did they display their emotions in public like that. Dumfounded, she managed:

"You—you two know each other, Miss Lewis?"

The blonde threw back her head and laughed. "Honey, there ain't a man west of the Mississippi that Lovey Lewis don't know. Except Handsome there," she jerked her head toward Mitch Brewster, "and his keeper. And I got to know those two pretty well on this stagecoach run. Didn't I, gents?"

The sheriff, a thin, wiry-looking man in his early forties, with a crop of healthy-looking iron-gray hair and good color in his cheeks, made a clucking noise and winked at Lovey. But Mitch Brewster wasn't even looking at the blonde woman. He hadn't even seemed to have heard her. He was watching Nina Williams.

As she went behind the desk and got out the big registry book and pens, Nina tried not to let the handsome outlaw's intently admiring gaze bother her. She tried to ignore him. But every few moments, she would catch herself glancing up to sneak a look at him. Each time his eyes were still upon her, and it was as though some sort of electrical contact were set off between them.

When she called them over to register, Nina noticed that Leo Hudson and the flashy blonde woman who called herself Lovey Lewis were standing near the fireplace, talking in low tones.

Seeing them, Nina felt a tiny pang of jealousy. She remembered that only a little while ago Leo had held her in his arms and kissed her and led her to believe that she was the only girl in the world for him. Yet, he had obviously known Lovey Lewis before—and they had been more than friends.

Somehow, this revelation hadn't hurt her as much as it should. She wondered if perhaps the obvious attentions of the outlaw, Mitch Brewster, had something to do with that.

Mitch, she saw, was standing over by a window, talking to the sheriff. They turned at her call and came over to the desk. As Mitch raised both hands up to the top of the desk, Nina saw that he was no longer manacled to the sheriff. The latter saw Nina's startled glance and said:

"Ain't no sense keepin' him chained up like a wild animal, ma'am. The way that blizzard's ragin' outside, this rooster couldn't possibly escape. Anyhow, he give me his word o' honor that he won't even try to get away."

Mitch Brewster leaned across the desk, his face so close to Nina's that she could see the tiny wind-and-sun crinkles at the corners of his blue eyes. He grinned and said softly:

"The sheriff is a right smart man, honey. He knows that I wouldn't even *want* to leave here. He'll probably have a hard time draggin' me away."

SHE tossed her head, but she couldn't quite hide the pleased look that lurked under the false mask of indifference she'd set upon her pretty face. "You probably give that same

palaver to every gal you meet," she told him.

Lovey Lewis, who had come up to the desk to sign the register, said: "You can tell him that again, sweetness. All men are liars and crooks. Once they know you understand that, they'll never give you any more trouble. Least that's the way it's worked with me." She turned to Mitch Brewster and pinched his cheek playfully. "Ain't that the truth, Mister Long, Lean and Luscious!"

"I resent that, Blondie!" the sheriff said crustily. But the twinkle in his young-looking eyes belied the sternness of his voice. "You're lookin' on a man who'll treat a woman right, comes a day he finds one worthy of her board and keep. Ain't found one interestin' enough yet, though."

Lovey Lewis arched her fine brows in surprise. "What's your handle, sheriff? I don't like to call men by their formal title."

"Sher'ff Monte Angus, o' Devil's Basin, ma'am," he replied proudly.

Cocking a hand on her hip jauntily, Lovey told him: "What do you mean by treatin' a woman right, Monte, honey? By that most men mean makin' her work and slave over a hot stove, cookin' and washin' and ironin'. You'll never find Lovey Lewis makin' that kind o' deal with *any* man."

Sheriff Angus shook his grizzled gray head. "Beg to contradict you again, sis. Gal smart enough to rope and hawgtie Monte Angus will do all right for herself. I got me a nice little spread in that there basin, the best Chinee cook in the world and an all-fired good housekeeper. All Mrs. Monte Angus will have to do—if there ever is one—is loll around and look pretty."

Lovey Lewis laughed and playfully pushed the tips of her tinted nails against the sheriff's chest. "Why, Monte!" she caroled. "Is that a proposal?"

The sheriff's lean face grew a fiery red, and he dropped his eyes in confusion. "Too much palaver goin' on around here," he said. "Let's get assigned to our room, then get some hot chow in our bellies."

With that, Nina Williams swung out from around the desk and led the four guests to the stairs in the rear. They filed up after her to the balcony, turned down the hall that led along a row of small, neat, but plainly furnished rooms. Nina then assigned each guest to a room and returned to the first floor of the stage station.

She saw that Leo Hudson had taken down one of the old ship's lamps that the Cap'n used for decoration. He was squatting before the fireplace, turning the lamp over and over in his big hands and studying it. In the two days he'd been here, Nina had seen Leo do that several times. She wondered about his intense interest in the lamps, but promptly forgot about it as she remembered the way Lovey Lewis, the honkatonk queen, had acted toward Leo. Perhaps, she mused, Lovey was right, and all men *were* liars and crooks.

Out in the big kitchen at the back of the station, Nina busied herself about a woodburning stove, on top of which a huge pot of rabbit stew was boiling and steaming. It was a simple fare that she and the Cap'n offered the stage passengers, but being piping hot and well prepared, it always seemed like a meal fit for royalty to the hungry travelers.

Nina spooned out some of the stew, pursed her ripe young lips and blew on the stew to cool it, then sipped it thoughtfully. Suddenly she heard a purring baritone voice, close behind her. "You can do me a big favor, beautiful—give me that spoon to use when we take chow."

Nina turned her head, her eyes widening in surprise. "Why?" she asked. "Why on earth would you want this spoon—" She broke off, blushing. Then, as crisply as possible, she said: "Guests aren't allowed back here in the kitchen, mister. Vamoose!"

"I'm not a guest, Nina," he corrected. "I'm a prisoner, remember. A prisoner of love, really. The other doesn't count."

NINA WILLIAMS didn't know what to say. She looked up again, and Mitch Brewster's long-lashed blue eyes were looking deep into her own. Little unruly locks of hair hung boyishly over his forehead, and Nina had to fight off a ridiculous impulse to reach up and push them back into place.

"Please go away," she said weakly. "Don't you know you should never bother

the cook?" She returned to the stove.

He laughed softly. "And the cook shouldn't bother one of the guests, either."

"I'm not botherin' you, mister," she told him.

"That's what *you* think! Nina, you don't even know your own powers." The slight smile dropped from his lips and was replaced by a sad and solemn expression. "They ought to call me 'Bad Luck Brewster'."

Nina thought she detected just a tiny glint of humor in his eyes but she couldn't be sure. Otherwise he looked so woebegone, she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "Why?" she said.

"Nina, all my life I've been looking for a gal like you. And now when I find her, it doesn't do me any good. I'm on way to prison—or mebbe to be hanged. Who knows?" He shook his head in a melancholy way. "If I'd met you sooner, Nina, everything might have been different."

Before she could say anything to that, he went on: "Would you do a poor prisoner a big favor, honey?"

"Well—that depends."

"It isn't much to ask," he pleaded. "First close your eyes."

For a moment Nina was going to refuse, but curiosity got the better of her. She closed her eyes and heard Mitch urge:

"Now show me how you did that before —how you cooled the soup. Pucker up your lips as though you were going to blow."

Without thinking, Nina did as he asked. Then abruptly, the full meaning of his strange request struck her. Her eyes flew open, and she saw he had moved very close to her. Before she could unpucker her lips, he murmured: "That's wonderful. You know just how to do it." Then he kissed her.

Nina had been caught by surprise. The second it took her to recover was fatal. By that time, Mitch Brewster's taut, firm lips were pressed hard and deep against her own. She felt his hands take hold of her arms and pull her close to him. She felt the strong, virile beat of his heart.

At first, Nina struggled and squirmed to free herself from Mitch's strong grasp. Once she almost broke free. To stop her, Mitch swiftly put one arm about her waist. She was instantly aware that his embrace was much stronger, much more ardent that Leo Hudson's had been. And the pressure of Mitch's lips against hers were doing all the same wonderful things to her that Leo's kiss had done—only a thousand times more so. It was like comparing the great, fierce flame of a torch to a tiny match glow.

Nina felt herself go up onto her toes. Uncontrollably, she felt her own arms go around his back, the fingers spreading, to hold him more tightly. Slowly, they pushed up to his shoulders, and then one hand moved to the back of his head and dug ecstatically into his crisp hair.

Suddenly, Nina knew what it had meant —the strange electric feeling she had gotten when she first looked at Mitch Brewster and every time their glances met thereafter. This was the second time in a short while that she'd been soundly kissed. First by an honest, upright young man—and now by a daring outlaw. It came to her that if this was what it was like to be kissed by an owlhoot, most girls were missing the experience of their lives.

And then Nina stopped thinking and became all blazing, soaring emotion. She felt as though she were flame, burning and shimmering brightly. All of her senses were swimming, her nerve-ends tingling and seeming ready to explode. ... .

Nina came swimming down out of that heaven of love and landed back to earth with a crash as the sound of hands clapping struck her ears. It was followed by a voice that said: "Bravo! A fair-to-middlin' exhibition of the stand-up-and-clinch type of osculation!"

CHAPTER THREE

Tips From an Expert

SLOWLY, dazedly, Nina dropped her arms from around Mitch Brewster, and stepped away from him. She blinked and stared at Lovey Lewis, who had come into the kitchen and was regarding them both with a mocking grin on her painted features.

Nina stormed: "You—you have no right to come snoopin' in here to spy on us!"

Lovey Lewis laughed and cocked her

blonde head. "Don't get yourself excited, honey," she said. "You aren't settin' any bad example for little Lovey. I enjoyed watchin' you. I've seen all kinds of lovin' in my time. I sort of consider myself an authority on the subject."

Horrified, Nina said: "You shouldn't talk so boldly about—about kissin'—and —and things like that."

"Sugar," the mocking blonde stopped her, "I can tell you a few things about the gentle art of huggin' and kissin'."

Nina felt as though her cheeks were on fire. She knew she shouldn't stand here and listen to this kind of talk. Wasn't it bad enough that she'd let that—that outlaw hold her in his arms, let alone allowing this blonde and brazen hussy to give her a lecture on the subject?

But some impish inner voice kept telling her that perhaps it would be a good subject for a girl to know something about.

All this time, Mitch Brewster was standing there, seeming to enjoy this sudden turn of affairs.

Lovey Lewis turned to him, saying: "I guess I don't have to tell you, Handsome, that there are all kinds of kisses. And I reckon I've tried 'em all. Now, you take the bear-hug kiss. I remember the first time I got one of those. It was in a honka-tonk, down in the Red River Valley. Man, that big burly miner like to have crushed every one o' my ribs."

In spite of herself, Nina found that she was listening, fascinated. Nina Williams was an imaginative girl. As Lovey described the ways of a man with a maid, it was almost as though Nina, herself, were experiencing the situations.

"Then there's the Joe Tease type," Lovey continued. "He's usually a dark, suave, smooth-talkin' hombre with sad, brooding eyes. He takes a long time gettin' to the point. He drives you loco with a lot of build-up palaver—then starts kissing your hands and your hair and your eyes and ears and nose before he gets to the real thing."

Mitch butted in, grinning. "Can you tell what type of kisses a man is likely to have on tap by his occupation?"

"Sure," Lovey answered. "The first kind I mentioned usually comes from the rough and rootin'-tootin' outdoor type—men who've been away from civilization for a long while and can't waste any time. The smoothie is usually a gambler or card-sharp or banker."

Mitch Brewster laughed and said: "That's almighty interestin', Lovey, but I'm afraid you're makin' Nina uncomfortable with all this talk about kissin'."

Nina was visibly agitated and flustered. Her pretty young features looked as red as if she were badly sunburned. She stammered: "Well, I just don't think it's fittin' to discuss such things in—in mixed company."

"Nonsense," said Lovey. "Ain't nothin' wrong with a good wholesome kiss. Gives a gal and a man a chance to really know each other. For instance, you take that sneaky, fib-tellin' Leo Hudson out there. There's really no high voltage in one of his kisses. The technique is all right, but one kiss from Leo tells a woman that the man's as false as fool's gold. You know his mind ain't really on his work—that he's busy, even then, figurin' some way to do somebody dirt."

Nina gasped when she heard that. As soon as it was put into words, she realized that it was exactly the strange inner feeling she'd experienced when Leo had kissed her.

Lovey went on: "I'll tell you, honey—as if you didn't know—that the best kissin' man in the world is a gay and dashing, handsome young outlaw like our friend Mitch. When he kisses a gal, she stays kissed. He puts his brand on her. All the dash and fire that make up his character go into his kiss. . . . And that reminds me that I haven't sampled that brand in a long, long time."

With that, Lovey Lewis stepped toward Mitch Brewster. She pressed close against him, lifted her face and reached up and tangled her fingers into his curly hair. She pulled his head down and put her mouth full and firmly against his and held it there.

WATCHING, horrified and with a strange feeling of anger mixed with envy, Nina saw Mitch Brewster's hands curl up tightly into fists against his thighs and then suddenly straighten out under the impact of Lovey's sudden and expert kiss. For a moment, he

seemed to be trying to fight the effects of Lovey's amorous attack. And then he gave in. His arms suddenly went around her waist, and he lifted her clear off the floor.

A lump choked up in Nina's throat. Lovey was right, she decided. All men *were* liars and cheats. Twice today, two different men had kissed her and tried to hooraw her into thinking that she was the only girl in the world—and then it turned out that they reacted the same way to any female who would lend them her lips. And this time, it was happening practically right under her nose.

She couldn't stand it any longer. Seeing Mitch Brewster let Lovey Lewis make love to him hurt her a million times worse than it had when the same thing had happened with Leo. With tears misting her eyes, she fled from the kitchen.

On the way upstairs, she met Sheriff Angus coming down. Through her tears, she told him: "I—I don't feel well. Y'all can fix your own chow. There's a pot of stew boilin' in the kitchen. Help yourselves."

Upstairs in her own room, Nina flung herself onto her cot and let the tears flow. Some time later, she got up and rinsed her face in cool water from the pitcher on the dresser. She was about to go back downstairs when she heard the sound of voices through the thin wall of the next room.

There was no mistaking the deep, clear tones of Lovely Lewis. That's what first attracted Nina's attention. Because she had not assigned that particular room to Lovey. With a little gasp, she realized that the room was occupied by Mitch Brewster. Lovey was visiting Mitch in his room.

Nina didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she somehow couldn't help herself. Especially when she heard Leo Hudson's name mentioned. Every once in awhile, Lovey's voice would fade and Nina would miss a few words or a sentence, but she heard enough to tell her what it was all about.

"I'm tellin' you the truth, honey," Lovey was saying excitedly. "I'm confidin' in you 'cause I'm sick and tired of gettin' the runaround from that sidewinder, Leo. If you want to team up with me, mebbe together we can outsmart that slinkin' coyote and beat him at his own game." Then Lovey's voice faded out.

From Lovey's excited words, Nina was able to put together the following story:

In a San Francisco honkatonk, Leo Hudson had heard a traveler tell about the mountain-top stage station that was decorated with the lamps of a sailing vessel. The description of these lamps tied in with a story Leo had heard about a ship being lost at sea with a trunk full of jewels being shipped in from the Far East.

There was a rumor that the Captain had escaped in a small boat, with the huge box of gems. When Leo Hudson heard about the stage station's lamps, they fitted the description of some known to have been on the doomed treasure ship. That, plus the fact that the owner of the stage station was known as "Cap'n" Williams, made Leo certain that he was the captain of that vessel, hiding up here in the mountains with his treasure chest of rich gems hidden somewhere nearby.

"I was with Leo when he heard that tale, Mitch," Nina heard Lovey say. "It happened in the cafe where I was entertainin'. And Leo and me—well we were pretty good friends. But what did the dirty prairie dawg do but pull a lowdown double-deal on me and skip out without me the next day.

"I knew where he'd headed, though, and got on the next stage. When I found him makin' up to the little gal who runs the station, that was the last straw. So, how about you and I bein' pardners on this deal, Handsome? Together, mebbe we can beat Leo to the Cap'n's buried treasure."

Mitch Brewster's answer to that proposition was an undecipherable mumbling sound that faded into silence. In her mind's eye, Nina could see Mitch and Lovey once more in each other's arms. She could almost hear the quickened sound of their breathing as they swayed together, locked in close embrace. Her hand moved to her own lips, still tender and tingling from Mitch's kiss, and she knew how Lovey Lewis felt at this moment.

Nina was furious. Not only was Mitch falling for blonde Lovey, but Nina had been fooled by Leo, too. He hadn't been really interested in her at all—he just wanted the fabulous chest of gems he be-

lieved hidden somewhere around the station.

SPIRITEDLY, Nina left her room and went back downstairs. The only person in the big main room of the station was Sheriff Monte Angus, who was squatted down on the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace toasting his shins.

"Hi, chicken," he called to her.

"Where's everybody?" Nina asked, more to make conversation and cover up her agitation than anything else.

"Gone upstairs to their rooms, I reckon," he answered. "Leo Hudson was last to go up. Said he was tuckered out and goin' to hit the hay early tonight. Reckon everybody feels the same. Goin' to turn in, m'self, in a few ticks. We got to rise early in the mornin' and hope we can hit out o' here before the snow drifts too deep over the trail."

Nina went on into the kitchen and cleaned up. About an hour later when she came out in the main room again, the sheriff was gone. Nina, too, went upstairs and tumbled into her bed. She was soon snug and comfortable from the warmth of the thick blankets and comforters, but somehow she couldn't seem to get to sleep.

She was on edge and restless. Pictures of all the things that had happened during the day began to drift through her mind. She remembered sitting with Leo in front of the fire and the way his kiss had stirred her. And how, later, when Mitch Brewster had held her in his arms, she had realized that she had thrilled to Leo's kiss mostly because it had been the first one she'd ever had and didn't know any better.

She said a little prayer that the blizzard would be so bad tonight that the stage wouldn't be able to leave in the morning. That would give her one more day with Mitch Brewster. She knew now that no matter what he was, she felt about him as she'd never felt about anybody before. And just because Lovey Lewis seemed interested in him, Nina told herself, that didn't mean that she was going to get Mitch. Nina was willing to fight for him if she had to.

And perhaps, she prayed, the charge against him would turn out to be a false one—or he might escape and come back to her again. . . . Or, perhaps, she might even be able to help him escape. . . .

Her thoughts were suddenly scattered as she heard a sound outside in the hall. She sat up in the pitchblack darkness of her room, staring toward the door. A moment later, the sound was repeated. Nina recognized it as the squeaking of a loose board out in the hall. Somebody was prowling around in the dark out there!

Swiftly, Nina tumbled out of bed. She grabbed her night wrapper and slipped into it before she tiptoed toward the door. Gently she eased the door open and peered out. Against the very faint film of light coming up from the fading fire downstairs, she saw the silhouetted figure of a man just starting down the steps.

Nina slipped out into the hall and, moving lightly as a cat on the balls of her feet, crept to the head of the stairs. The glow from the embers in the fireplace dimly lit a small part of the room below. But there was no sign of anybody down there.

But Nina knew that she had not been seeing things. Somebody had left his room and had gone downstairs.

Slowly, she moved down the steps, avoiding boards that she knew might creak, not making a sound. At the bottom, she slipped toward the registration desk, which was in shadows. Even if she had made a mistake and only imagined that she'd seen somebody, she now wanted to make sure that she'd locked the till where the money was kept.

As she moved around the desk, a large, dark bulk of a figure loomed up before her. Before she could stop, she had bumped into it. Instantly, strong hands caught her by the arms.

Nina whispered: "Let go of me, you thief! Let go of me before I scream!"

There was the muffled sound of chuckling and a deep whisper said: "There's only one way I can prevent that, sweetheart!" The hands gripping her arms pulled her close. Lips suddenly searched for and found hers in the darkness. They were like a touch of flame against her mouth. The strangely exciting sensations that were becoming familiar—but nonetheless stirring—surged through Nina

once more. Momentarily she knew she ought to struggle.

As she was drawn more and more tightly against a broad, strong chest, and felt the gentle yet forceful mouth that moved expertly against her own, snatches of Lovey Lewis' discussion on the art of kissing flashed through her mind. Nina knew then who this man was. There could be no mistake.

Just then, he suddenly turned her loose. She was still trying to recover from the tingling shock of his kiss when he wheeled away from her.

"Stop! Come back!" Nina yelled, as soon as she recovered her breath.

But he kept running, across the room and up the stairs to the second floor. Nina ran after him, but when she reached the top, there was no one in sight. All the doors were closed. She stood still and listened but there wasn't a sound except for her own breathing.

She moved along the hall to the door of Mitch Brewster's room. She stood there, suddenly trembling and chilled from the drafty hall air and from the excitement of the past few moments. She nipped at her full lower lip with her teeth in indecision before finally rapping softly on the door with her fist. She rapped several times before a sleepy voice called out: "Who is it? . . . Come in."

Holding her breath, she reached down and twisted the knob, swung open the door and stepped into the room. She stood there, leaning against the closed door, staring at Mitch Brewster's sleepy face.

He was in bed under a pile of blankets, his lean and handsome face beautifully highlighted and shadowed by the dim glow of a bedside candle. He grinned at her, and for a moment, Nina felt like she wanted to sink through the floor.

"I—I'm sorry," she murmured, her face violently flushed. "I didn't know you were in bed. I thought—"

She broke off, her eyes narrowing dangerously as they spotted the toe of a boot sticking out from under the bottom of the blankets. Swiftly, she strode to the foot of the bed, reached down and violently yanked off the blankets. Mitch Brewster was lying in the bed, fully dressed and grinning at her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nina Gets Trapped

NINA fumed: "You think you're very clever—you crook! And to think that I've been feeling sorry for you, thinking that perhaps you weren't really as much of a scoundrel as the sheriff painted you! Now I know different. Any man that would stoop to sneaking about in the middle of the night to rob a few dollars from the till of a poor mountain stage station—"

She stopped, at a loss for words. Her tirade didn't even seem to phase him. He kept right on facing her with his impudent, almost mischievous grin, his curly hair tumbling over his forehead.

"Honey," he said, "you sure can dress a man down!"

"I hate you!" she said in a tense, angry whisper. "I—I hope I never see you again!"

She wheeled and had started to reach for the knob of the door when suddenly, almost as if by signal, somebody out in the hall rapped on the door.

In a flash, Mitch Brewster was out of the bed and moving, silently, catlike, toward her. He eased her away from the door. He whispered: "What are you goin' to do, honey? You can't be found here in my room, late at night like this. . . . Mebbe I can get rid of them."

Aloud, he called out: "What the hell do you want, wakin' a man out of his sleep?" He tried to make his voice sound gruff and drowzy.

"It's me—Leo Hudson," came the whispered answer through the wood of the door. "Let me in, Brewster. This is important."

"I'll see you in the mornin'." Mitch told him. "It'll have to wait. I ain't gettin' out of this warm bed for anybody."

"Don't be a fool!" Hudson whispered back. "This can't wait until morning. I—I've got a plan to help you escape. Open up!"

"I'd better do as he says," Mitch breathed into Nina's ear. He was holding her protectively close against him now. And Nina suddenly no longer felt chill. It was warm and comfortable, snuggled

against Mitch Brewster's broad shoulder.

"If I don't," Mitch went on, "he's liable to hang around outside and spot you when you leave anyhow."

"If it was anybody but Leo!" Nina said. "I can't let him see me in here. I—"

"Quick!" he stopped her. He turned her around and led her toward a door against the far wall. "In the closet, here. I'll get rid of him as fast as I can, honey."

He opened the closet door and Nina stepped inside. She huddled in the narrow, musty space, the darkness thick around her. She heard Mitch go to the door of the room and open it. She noticed a crack of light in the closet door, and by gluing her eye to it, discovered she could see part of what was going on in the room. She saw Leo Hudson for a moment and noticed that he, too, was fully dressed.

"I'm not going to waste any time," Leo said. "It might take us all night to do this." Nina heard the crackling of a piece of paper, and then Leo went on: "You see this, Brewster? This is a map of the south slope of this mountain."

"What kind of a map?" Mitch demanded.

"A treasure map. It's a long story, Brewster, and I don't have time to go into it now; but believe me, I know what I'm talking about. There's a sea chest stuffed full of precious stones hidden at that spot marked X on this map."

"Where did you get that map?" Mitch wanted to know.

"I've been looking for it for two days," Leo confided excitedly. "I finally found it earlier tonight. It was hidden in one of those old ship's lamps that decorate this place."

Hearing that, Nina drew in a sharp breath. Perhaps there was something in this story of the ship's lamps and the treasure chest of gems from the ill-fated sailing ship. Yet she didn't see how it was possible.

"Where do I fit into the picture?" Mitch asked. "If this is on the level, why bother to cut me in?"

"That's easy," Leo answered. "I'll need help. There's a blizzard raging, and the plan I've got requires two men. But we've got to work fast. Go with me, Brewster, and I'll split the treasure with you and help you to escape."

"What's the scheme?"

"It's simple. First we find this spot and dig up the chest of gems. Then we'll return, steal the stage and run off with it. We can ditch it at the first town we reach —or steal some horses from the first ranch. We've got to do it tonight. The old Cap'n who runs this place is liable to return tomorrow and spoil the whole deal."

For a long moment, Mitch Brewster didn't answer. He stood there, looking straight into Leo Hudson's eyes. Finally he shook his blond head. "Not a chance, Hudson," he said firmly.

LEO HUDSON gaped. "Why not?" he demanded hotly. "What's the matter with you, you fool? What have you got to lose? You're already wanted for half a dozen crimes. Why, you almost got caught tonight, robbing the station till. If you'd take a chance like that for a few dollars, why not for thousands?"

"I'll tell you why not," Mitch said in a deadly quiet voice. "Because I don't trust any slippery, double-dealin' sidewinder like you!"

"What are you talkin' about?" Leo demanded angrily.

"Do you know who I really am?" Mitch asked.

"Who you really—? Why, of course. You're Mitch Brewster—a wanted train robber. What's the matter with you, have you gone loco, or somethin'?"

"Uh-uh," Mitch told him. "I'm Mitch Brewster, all right. And a train robber. But I'm also the executioner for the Black Butte gang. You've heard of them?"

"Yeah!" Leo murmured in an awed voice. "You say you're the executioner?"

"The gang appointed me the one to go after and gun down a belly-crawlin' coyote name o' Leo Hudson, who double-crossed us the night o' the Rimrock Bank holdup. Now do you know what I mean, Leo? Nobody can get away with a stunt like that against the Black Butte gang. It's taken me seven months to run you down. But I finally made it, Leo. Remember that night of June fifth and start sayin' your prayers—rat!"

Nina heard Leo Hudson begin to whim-

per. Finally he burst out: "That bank holdup you're talkin' about was the night o' June fifth, Brewster? That proves you're making a mistake. You've trailed the wrong man, Brewster! That night, I was pulling a holdup, myself. I held up a mail train of the Mountain-Pacific line, between Witch's Gap and Redhorn. I made a haul of ten thousand in registered mail."

"You swear to that?" Mitch persisted.

"Yes, yes!" Leo squealed. "I swear it."

There was a brief silence, and Nina wondered what was happening. Then she heard a terrible gasp of surprise. Right after that, Mitch Brewster's voice called: "It's all right, Nina. It's all over. You can come out of the closet."

With trembling hand, Nina opened the door and stepped out into the room. She saw a strange sight. Leo Hudson was crouched against a wall, perspiration pouring over his dark face. And Mitch Brewster was fitting a pair of steel handcuffs onto his wrists. Mitch turned to Nina, grinning.

He said: "I hope you heard all of that, Nina. I'm depending on you to be my witness against this hombre when he goes to trial for robbing the U. S. mails."

It was too much for Nina. She felt weak behind the knees. She shook her head bewilderedly. "I—I don't think I understand, Mitch. Who are you *really?*"

Laughing, he told her: "I've been using the right name, honey. But I had to use several different roles to trap this hyena." He suddenly held out his hand and showed her the shiny badge of a United States marshal.

"Then you weren't really a prisoner of Sheriff Angus?" she said. "You aren't a train robber at all?"

"Hardly, Nina," he said. "The sheriff has been helping me on this case. We figured it was a good plan to maybe loosen Hudson up and make him confide in me. I put the finishin' touches on it tonight by pretending to rob the till and letting you almost catch me. I figgered Leo would hear about that, and if there was any doubt in his mind about my honesty, that would be the convincer. But when he came to me, it was for an entirely—"

Leo Hudson interrupted him. He snarled at Nina: "You little no-good wench! Playin' Miss Sweet-and-Innocent with me for two whole days, makin' a fool out o' me. And here I find you in this hombre's room. Why, I ought to—"

"Just a moment, Leo!" she cut him off. Her eyes were blazing with anger. "How dare you call me names, *Mr. Shipbuilder!* And all the time you were a sneakin' mail thief, wanted by the government. Not to mention a sidewinder plotting to steal some fantastic treasure in jewels you believe is hidden around here."

At that, Leo Hudson's dark eyes turned crafty. He turned toward Mitch Brewster and said softly: "The gems! I forgot about them. Brewster, surely you ain't goin' to pass up a chance for a fortune! Turn me loose and—"

He stopped when he saw that Mitch wasn't paying any attention to him. Mitch was looking at Nina. He said: "What was that you said about the treasure, Nina? You spoke as though there wasn't any such thing. How did you know about it in the first place?"

She said: "I overheard you and Lovey Lewis discussing the matter earlier this evening. The walls are so thin, I could hear every word."

Mitch Brewster gulped and looked uncomfortable for a moment. "You overheard our conversation?" he said.

Nina blushed. "Well—some of it. That is, I heard her story about the treasure. Of course, it's a lot of nonsense. There isn't any treasure."

"There isn't?" Mitch reached out and dug a hand into Leo Hudson's breast pocket and pulled out a dirty, faded slip of paper. It had a rude drawing of a map upon it. "What about this map that Hudson found hidden in one of the ship's lamps?"

Nina stared at it, then began to laugh. She couldn't even stop laughing to explain. Then a strange voice come from the doorway, behind them. "Reckon I kin explain that 'ere map, stranger!"

Mitch Brewster and the others turned toward the door. A strange-looking figure stood there. He was short and stout and dressed in buckskin. He was still covered with snow, some of it clinging to his scraggly brows and long walrus-style mustache. He had a cherry-red nose and small, alert-looking, bright blue eyes.

"I hid that map in the lamp, mister," he said. "Happens that's the map locating one o' my moonshine stills on the south side o' the mountain. Allus draw me a map 'cause sometimes I forgit where I've hidden the blame stills. I hid that particler map one day when I heard there was a revenoo agent in these parts."

"Who are you, old timer?" Mitch asked him.

"Name o' Cap'n Williams," the oldster replied. "Owner o' this here stage station. Father o' that there good-lookin' gal you probably been shinin' up to, son. What's this all about a treasure?"

"He's crazy!" Leo Hudson screamed. "There is a treasure. There has to be! You're a sea captain—and the name of the treasure ship is even on one of the lamps. I saw it. The *Albatross!*

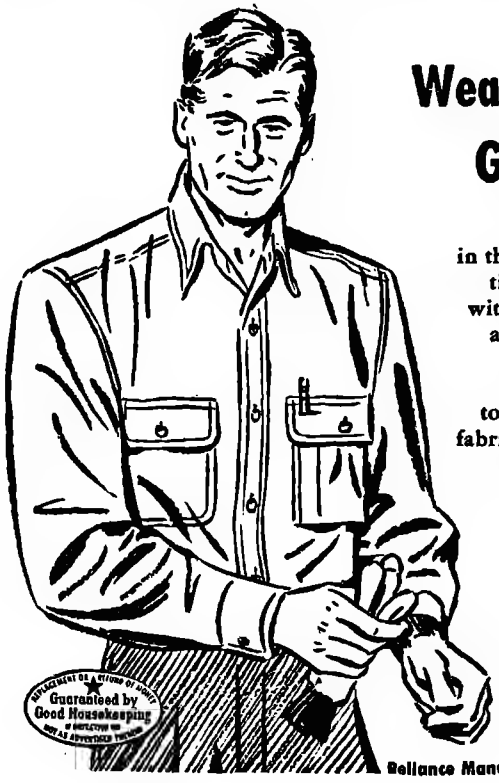
OLD CAP'N WILLIAMS chuckled. "You didn't see any such thing," he corrected. "What you saw on that lamp were the letters *A* and *L* and a blank space and then some more that spelled out *R-O-S-S*. Right?"

"Sure!" Leo cried. "Just like I said—the *Albatross!*"

"Happens you made a leetle mistake," the Cap'n said. "That there letterin' is what's left of the name o' the manufacturer o' those lamps. What it said originally was *Albert Ross*. Happens I won them danged lamps in a poker game, son. As for callin' me a sea captain, I resent that, mister. They call me 'Cap'n,' 'cause that was my rank durin' the War Between the States. Cavalry Captain, that is!"

Just then, Sheriff Monte Angus, Lovey Lewis and the sleepy-eyed stage driver all came drifting into the room, awakened from their sleep by the sound of so many voices.

When old Cap'n Williams spotted Lovey Lewis, her lush figure tightly wrapped in a clinging velvet robe, his eyes almost spun in their sockets. Snow began melting off of his mustache as though it were over a heated stove. He let out a rebel yell and did a briefly hectic dance, before he got doubled over with a crick in the back and Nina had to help him



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to the bed. He sat there out of breath.

The whole story was explained to everyone, then, and since nobody seemed tired, Nina took them downstairs and built up the fire. While they stood around it, chattering about the things that had happened—all except Leo Hudson, whom the sheriff had manacled to the bed in his room—Nina went out into the kitchen and brewed some steaming coffee.

When it was ready, she called the others in. But she didn't stay to help them drink it. She went back outside and sat down on the bearskin rug in front of the roaring log fire, and stared moodily into the flames. Now that the excitement had worn off, she felt tired and depressed.

She was so occupied with her own thoughts that for a few seconds she didn't notice that somebody had come out and sat down on the bearskin next to her. Then she felt a warm strong hand close over hers. She looked up, and Mitch Brewster was next to her.

Nina tried to pull her hand away, but Mitch wouldn't let her. She said: "Please, Mitch. Leave me alone. Go back with the others."

"Why?" he murmured. "What's the matter, kitten? What's on your pretty mind?"

"Nothin' you'd be interested in."

"Anything that has to do with you, I'm interested in," he assured her. His fingers squeezed her hand, then slowly raised it up, and the next instant, she felt his warm lips pressing into the sensitive little hollow of her palm. It sent tickling thrills chasing up her whole arm. But she pulled her hand away almost roughly.

"Don't do that!" she said.

Mitch looked puzzled, then he smiled. "I think I know why," he told her. "You're thinkin' of that lecture Lovey gave us about kissing techniques. You're rememberin' that, aren't you?"

Nina didn't answer right away. After awhile, she said: "Why don't you go on back with her, Mitch. You don't have to stay out here feelin' sorry for me. This is one part you don't have to act out any longer."

He pulled her around to face him. His face was very close to hers, and she'd never seen eyes as blazingly bright.

"You listen to me, Nina," he said, sternly. "Lovely Lewis means nothing to me. I learned long ago that her type wasn't for a serious hombre like me. I had to play up to her tonight because I saw when we first came in that she knew Leo Hudson. I thought maybe I could get some information out of her about him and I did. . . . Right now, Lovey's out in the kitchen, pitchin' all her charms at Sheriff Monte Angus. I think she's interested in that ranch of his, where a wife won't have to do anything but sit around and look pretty. And he's eatin' it up."

Nina felt her heart begin to beat faster. "You're sure that's the truth, Mitch?" she breathed. "Oh, Mitch, Mitch!" she cried. "Everything's turnin' out all right, after all, isn't it?"

She snuggled up against his chest, and his arms folded her closer and closer to him. "It sure is, honey!" he said.

She felt his lips brushing against her ear and she shivered delightedly and whispered: "You know, Mitch, darlin', that talk about kissin' *was* interestin', now that I think about it. With the right man, it might be—well—fun, for a gal to try all those different techniques."

"There's never any time like the present," Mitch said, his breath like a rush of warm summer wind in her ear.

The last thing that Nina Williams thought of was that, if Lovey Lewis came out of the kitchen too soon, she was going to have a few more brand-new techniques to add to her collection.

THE END

The winning last line of the April PIN-UP GIRL Limerick Contest . . .

This musician has charms to soothe
and to set
All masculine heart strings off-key,
But for moonlight do-re-meetings she'd
rather duet—
With her man-*dolin on her knee.*

This musician has charms to soothe
and to set
All masculine heart strings off-key,
But for moonlight do-re-meetings she'd
rather duet—
With the man-*dolin on her knee.*

was a tie won by both Mrs. B. Marie Fix, 1804 B. Lynda Lane, Marietta, Ga., and E. B. Dorman, 143½ Halifax St., Petersburg, Va.

This dangerous man is
WANTED—for stealing a kiss
Right under the sheriff's pretty
nose,
She's put a price on his heart,
and you can reckon on this—

To finish the limerick in this July contest just write the last line on a postcard and mail to Pin-up Girl, RANGELAND ROMANCES, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, N. Y. The winner will be awarded one year's subscription to RANGELAND ROMANCES. In case of ties, prizes of equal value will be awarded. All entries for this July contest must be in our office at the above address by midnight on June 24th, 1948. The judge's decision will be final. See opposite page for winner of April contest.

CUTE, DARK AND SCANDALSOME

Audacious Cleo didn't mind being branded a fascinating minx, until the hard-to-get sheriff spooked — at the drop of a kiss . . . and a kerchief.

CLEO WARING looked like no schoolmarm the town of Buckeye had ever seen. What with wondrous-wide blue eyes that danced with her beguiling smile at the slightest provocation, and unbelievably long black hair that was like a falling mantle of midnight, and sweet young curves that were a temptation to behold—and be held—there was scarcely a red-blooded man for miles and miles around, who didn't wish to take up readin', writin' and 'rithmetic, plus a fourth R of his own—romancin'.

There were some cowpokes who muttered darkly that young uns nowadays had it much better than they deserved. And there were mothers who submitted their offspring to go to school with grim warnings about the proper place to pay their attention.

And, not counting Millie Peters, there were at least a dozen Buckeye belles who saw a dozen shades of red every time Cleo came down the street, or into a room, or even into the conversation. But of all the piddlin'-sized population, there was only one who really got ornery about it.

"Women—" was Steve Corcoran's oft-repeated flat statement—"they're all alike. There ought to be a law again' 'em."

And his unsmiling, menacing expression said plainer than words, that as sheriff of Buckeye, this would be one law he would enforce with the greatest of pleasure.

Cleo had heard his sneering remarks, and she had seen the strong dislike written all over his nice, good-looking face. But she had tossed her pretty head, winked saucily at those men fortunate enough to be standing nearby, and thus given a most satisfactory impression of not noticing Steve Corcoran's very existence, much less his personal opinions of women. After all, reasoned Cleo, what was one little fish in the sea—no matter how powerfully built and ruggedly handsome a fish—compared with an entire oceanful?

When she had first arrived in Buckeye, however, it had been a different, if short-lived, story. A stranger in town, and of frank, bold intention, Cleo had given the eligible courting field a cursory survey and soon settled on the most likely prospect. A prospect with hair that shone like ripe wheat in the sun, who wore a silver star on his shirt, and a promising aura of virility around his person.

After that, Cleo had wasted no time. A girl doesn't want to teach a mess of other folks' children for the rest of her life.

"Sheriff," she had confronted him in his office without further ado, "the school house is off in a mighty lonely stretch of wilderness." And then, with an appealing glance that told of utter helplessness, "I'd sure like to know I had protection in case I need it."

Steve Corcoran had given her a wicked grin. "*You* need protection?" he drawled.

By Diane Austin

He said evenly, "You're very bewitchin'—but I'm not havin' any."

"Why, I reckon every man hereabouts must be a-lookin' out for you."

She said, sweetly, "You're very kind."

He said evenly, "You're very bewitchin' —but I'm not havin' any."

"Oh?" she had said, stunned, not bothering to feign ignorance of his meaning.

Still grinning, he had said, "Yep. The first gal I ever kissed sent her pa shotgun huntin' for me. I ran a speck faster. The second turned out to have been engaged—to a carnival strong man. The third, fourth, fifth and sixth slapped my face. The seventh. . . ."

Cleo didn't wait for any more. Still, flouncing from the room with a saucy swish of her skirt, she couldn't help but hear Steve's last words:

"Go ask Millie Peters, if you don't believe me. I swore off just before I came to her."

And so, after that Cleo had kept a calculated distance from Steve Corcoran, and looked disdainfully upon Millie Peters' never-ceasing attempts to flirt the sheriff into surrender, and otherwise steer the long arms of the law around her.

In this show of indifference, Ned Burnside had been of invaluable assistance to her. True, the florid-faced, portly rancher was one of Millie's discarded suitors, but at the present time he was sombrero over spurs in love with Cleo. He trailed her nearly everywhere, more faithfully than her own shadow, and sulked appreciably when a rival horned in. As Cleo figured it, she had given Steve Corcoran first chance —now Ned and a host of other Buckeye buckaroos were ample proof of her disregard for him.

There was one ripple on the calm, glassy-smooth surface of her composure, however, and that was a gangly, freckle-faced ripple, whose first name could have been Mischief—but was Johnny, and whose last name could have been anything else in the world—but happened to be Corcoran. Johnny was Steve's brother, and which was the worse—the impish twelve-year-old, or the woman-loathing sheriff—Cleo wasn't quite certain. Except that Steve didn't come to the school house every day to plague her—and Johnny did.

On an average, Johnny picked three fights a day, tormented four little girls who invariably wailed at the top of their healthy lungs, and devised countless ways and means to disrupt whatever lesson was in progress. In vain did Cleo rap him on the knuckles and keep him in after dismissal; he would make her a mocking grimace, and the following day would be twice as misbehaving. She attempted, by way of punishment, almost everything short of reporting him to his brother, though she often felt that Johnny suspected this, and made the most of his suspicions.

HEREFORE, that otherwise lovely and peaceful spring morning, when she was rudely distracted from her poetry reading, she knew exactly what to expect.

"Hisss." The sound seemed to fill the room. "Hisss, hisss."

Slowly, Cleo put down her book, and simultaneously every child in the room turned to gaze at Johnny and await developments.

"Johnny Corcoran," she said ominously, "were you hissing me?"

Johnny stood up, the picture of righteous innocence, and clasped his hands behind his back. "No, ma'am," he said piously.

Behind him someone snickered, and though she knew beforehand how futile it was to contend with him, Cleo nevertheless persisted. "I wasn't imagining things. If it wasn't you, who was it then?"

Still cherubic-like, Johnny said soberly, "Maybe there's a rattler in the room." And then, with a sudden yelp, "Watch out, everybody! There he is!"

At that, shrieks and screams and confusion filled the room, and it was a good ten minutes before Cleo could restore a semblance of order. Finally, she faced the grinning Johnny again, and if wishes were potent, he would then and there have vanished from the earth.

"What *am* I going to do with you?" she said.

It was more a cry of despair than a question, but Johnny had an answer for that, too. "Want my brother, the sheriff, to come to school?"

Cleo heard the girls' titters, saw the boys' smirks. *What was that old saying about little pitchers,* she thought dimly.

"That won't be necessary," she said quietly. "Perhaps if you sit with the girls for a spell, you'll learn better manners."

"Girls!" Johnny sneered, so like Steve that for some absurd reason Cleo felt her knees go a-tremble.

She said, hastily, "You heard me. And for tomorrow you can write out fifty times —'I will never again hiss the teacher if I know what's good for me.' Then sign it."

"Nobody's gonna make me do nothin'," Johnny said sullenly, but for the rest of that day, he was as quiet as she could hope to have him.

Much too quiet, Cleo sensed, vaguely disturbed, as the youngsters filed out late that afternoon. It was upsets like this that caused her over and over again to vow that she would accept Ned Burnside, the very next time he asked her to marry him.

She smiled to herself, as she thought of the dance the night before, and the way Ned had pleaded with her. Now if Ned Burnside only looked a little less like—well, like Ned Burnside, and a little more like Steve—

Just in time she caught herself, and sat up straighter in the chair. Whatever had possessed her to think of that no-account sheriff? Him and his high-rolling aversion to females! It was just that she was so wrought up and weary, she told herself. All that stomping around last night, and now this scene with Johnny. . . . It wouldn't hurt to rest a spell before riding home.

Tiredly, Cleo put her head down on the desk. It wasn't the softest pillow she had ever had, but what with the day's ruckus leaving her spent, and the shadows lengthening outside, and the dusk creeping into the room, she was soon fast asleep.

Afterward, Cleo dimly remembered that she had had some queer, nightmarish sort of dream in which a murky figure was approaching her. But at the time she awoke, it was only with surprised wonder that it should be nightfall already. Still, the nap had done her a heap of good, she thought, as she stretched and rose from her cramped position. She felt a great deal more refreshed, and curiously lightheaded, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her mind.

Mechanically, her hand went up to brush her hair from her face, and the next second she knew a cold, paralyzing fear. Where, formerly, the thick black tresses had clustered around her shoulders, there was now nothing but air—empty, frightening air!

Wildly, Cleo felt of her head, but her bloodless, quivering fingers touched only short, curling ends of hair. Her first thought was that she must still be dreaming, but the reality of the familiar classroom surroundings told her that this was no dream. While she had slept—someone had helped himself to her long locks.

And then, like a far-off echo in her consciousness, she seemed to hear Johnny Corcoran saying, *"Nobody's gonna make me do nothin' . . . ."*

Suddenly, the picture was horribly clear. Under cover of darkness, the young scamp had lingered around the school house, and seeing his enemy defenseless and asleep, had hit upon his devilish mode of revenge. The more Cleo sat there and thought about it, the more positive she was that Johnny was the culprit.

She set her lips in a thin, straight line. Fighting and teasing and even snakes she could take from that pint-sized desperado, but this was going too far—plenty too far.

Fury lent wings to her feet as she ran outside and unhitched her horse. She headed him straight for Steve Corcoran's office, riding in swift accompaniment to the rage that was steadily mounting inside her. And once in front of his cabin, she was out of the saddle like greased lightning, ready to strike.

There was a crudely-lettered sign on the door, which advised:

PLEASE KNOCK.

Below it, a second informed all who could read:

SHERIFF OFF DUTY. COME BACK TOMORROW.

Cleo settled matters by bursting right in.

STEVE CORCORAN was in the act of removing his boots, which he apparently intended to accomplish more by the right amount of picturesque swearing than by any effort or exertion. He glanced up at Cleo's entrance, winced

as the door slammed behind her, then resumed his pulling and tugging.

"Get outa here," he said through clenched teeth. "Can't you see I'm busy."

"Not too busy to encourage your spoiled-rotten scalawag of a brother," Cleo snapped.

Steve looked up at her again. "I don't know who you are, ma'am," he said in a tight voice, "but I reckon you'd better hold your tongue. Those are foolhardy words you're spoutin' there."

Cleo all but gaped at his brassness. "So now you're gonna pretend you don't know me," she flared. "Steve Corcoran, your brother is the worst kind of unmentionable varmint—but you're another!"

One boot flew off and hit against the opposite wall. From his sitting position Steve squinted up at her. "Well, if it isn't Miss Wisdom Bringer in person," he said at last. "I nearly didn't rec'nize you with that new haircut." He chuckled. "It's kinder wenchy-lookin', isn't it?"

Cleo could hardly speak, for the anger that welled in her throat. "You—you critter," she sputtered. "Do you think I'd deliberately cut my own hair?"

"What else?" he shrugged. "I wouldn't put it past you."

"Your brother did—that's what else! He crept up on me while I was sleeping, and—and—"

She could go no further, for Steve was grinning at her, diabolically, and one eyebrow lifted, in the faintest curve of amusement. "Oh, come now," he said. "A little button like that?" He went back to wrestling with the remaining boot.

"He did so do it!" she finished stoutly. "He cut off my hair!"

"All right," Steve said placidly. "So you've been scalped. Serves you right. Serves all women right. There ought to be a law again' 'em. Here—give me a hand with this, willya?"

Grumbling a little, she stooped. Maybe once he had gotten those fool boots off, he'd listen to reason. Steve gave a mighty push just then, and she gave a hardy pull—and the boot came off. So suddenly, and so forcefully though, that Cleo lost her balance and tumbled to the floor in an ignominious heap.

Steve tilted back in his chair and laughed uproariously, while Cleo regarded him from below with a dangerous glint of fire in her blue eyes. Laugh at her, would he? Her first impulse was to tell him off in explicit, succulent terms. But then, a wily notion enticed her into a much more pleasing action.

"Help me up," she commanded slyly. "You help me up this instant."

In the ensuing seconds, Cleo entertained herself with delightful visions of strong arms encircling her waist, of being drawn up close to a manly silver-starred chest. And then who could tell but that Steve would forget his prejudices long enough to—well, to forget them altogether.

The next minute he was towering over her, just as she had forseen. But instead of two clinging arms, she was offered one outstretched hand.

"Here," he said. "Grab a hold."

Considerably deflated, Cleo grabbed. But she wasn't finished with Steve Corcoran yet. Not by a long shot. There'd be further opportunities, she was sure. Because more than ever she was determined on making them.

When he had her on her feet again, Steve said gravely, "Now what's all this about Johnny?"

Cleo blinked. She had completely forgotten her ravished locks. But with emphatic thoroughness, she plunged into an account of the episode.

"You can see he's got to be punished for this," she concluded. "I had the longest hair of any girl in town—and now look at me!"

Steve looked. He contemplated her crown of short, curly hair, strayed a little to the flashing blue of her eyes, then down to the generous fullness of her lips. From there, he overstepped the bounds completely.

"I—just meant my hair," Cleo said breathlessly.

"Oh!" He smiled. "How long did you say your hair was again?"

Ha! Cleo thought maliciously. Why worry herself about making more opportunities, when Steve was already doing such a fine job?

And so, for answer, she stepped up close to him, took his hand and drew it around to the small of her back. Then she reached for his other hand and did the same, pressing it against the thin material

of her shirt. Then she looked up at him.

"It came all the way down to there," she said demurely.

There were several things a man was likely to do, finding himself in such a situation, Cleo very well knew. He might murmur a few complimentary nothings about what nice long hair she must have had. Or, he might let go of her and beat a hasty retreat. Or—as was to be hoped—he might make the most of his armful of willing girl. For the space of a heartbeat she waited, wondering which Steve would do. And then her curiosity was deservingly satisfied.

First, Steve said, "Sure was mighty long hair you had there."

Next, he let her go abruptly and stepped back from her.

And then he added, his expression perfectly serious, "I just wanted to set you straight. This is gonna be *my* idea—not yours."

Hardly had he spoken when back went his hands, straining her hard against him, and Steve Corcoran was kissing Cleo Waring as she had never been kissed before. Which more than made up for the subsequent fact that Cleo Waring was kissing Steve Corcoran as she had never kissed before. She kept her eyes closed, and just let herself drift along on a warm, lazy tide of languor.

After a while, she became aware that the kisses must have stopped, for Steve was saying, "You can look now, I reckon —the experimentin's over. Okay, what're *you* gonna do about it?"

Cleo opened her eyes, wide, then, and seeing Steve's sardonic countenance, flushed. She might have realized she couldn't hope to best him. She might have known his lips were liars, making sweet promises that their owner had no intention of keeping.

"Do about it?" she repeated, fencing for time.

"Sure," he said. "You savvy—call out the Army on account of I kissed you, or run home to your ma, or slap my face." Then he nodded thoughtfully. "Hanged if I don't judge you to be the face-slappin' type."

"Then be hanged," Cleo said, her smile

Plenty of dates for Lois, NOW!
I'M OFF TO THE PICNIC, MOTHER!
PICNIC NOW-DANCE TONIGHT ...ISN'T BOB RUSHING YOU LATELY?
HE SURE IS-EVER SINCE I TOOK MY BROTHER'S ADVICE -A LIFEBUOY BATH EVERY DAY!
LIFEBUOY IS THE ONLY SOAP ESPECIALLY MADE TO STOP B.O.— CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT. LIFEBUOY EVERY DAY GIVES ME LASTING PROTECTION.
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IT'S EASIER TO OFFEND IN SUMMER SO I NEVER MISS MY DAILY LIFEBUOY BATH! I FEEL SO REFRESHED AND I'M SAFE FROM B.O. TRY GENTLE LIFEBUOY ONCE...AND YOU'LL USE IT FOR LIFE!
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belieing her words. "For it so happens that I make it a habit never to slap anyone who's kissed me with his boots off. Instead—I do this!"

With all her might, she brought the heel of her shoe down hard on Steve's toes. She paused only long enough to revel in his sharp exclamation of anguish, then ran from the office.

But there was no longer any wrath in Cleo's heart as she journeyed home, only bitter, bitter sorrow. For, at the first touch of Steve's lips on hers, the flippant game she had been playing of toying with his affections, had turned into something far more vital and desperate—something that wasn't a game at all. She had invited Steve's kisses, she had *wanted* them, and though he would undoubtedly despise her more than ever now, she knew she would never rest until she had tasted of them again.

N THE classroom the following morning, she snapped at the children and glared balefully at any mite courageous enough to risk her displeasure by so much as opening his mouth. She had tied her hair up in an attractive red scarf, and anxiously awaited Johnny Corcoran's reactions.

But when the boy marched in, a full hour late, by not so much as a smile did he betray himself.

"Well?" she challenged him.

He came directly up to her and flung a few sheets of paper on her desk.

"You asked for this, ma'am," he said very politely, then took his seat.

Cleo frowned as she picked up the sheets, but when she saw the scrawled lines on them, she remembered. *I will never again hiss the teacher if I know what's good for me* . . . . She had told Johnny to write that fifty times, because of his rude behavior yesterday.

Then she looked more closely at the half-scribbled words, and all feeling seemed to ebb from her body. The sentence had been written out as instructed, except for one crucial difference. The word *hiss* was spelled K-I-S-S and the paper was signed: *Steve Corcoran.*

She glanced up, stricken, and to her further horror, Johnny winked at her, knowingly, meaningfully. Then she paused.

"I reckon you'd better not sit with the girls, after all, Johnny," she managed, weakly.

In the days that followed, Cleo was obliged to act more and more like a guilty sneak thief. Because not for anything would she face the Buckeye citizenry with her altered appearance, or give any single one of them the gloating satisfaction of knowing of her come-uppance.

It wasn't that her looks were spoiled; on the contrary, the breezy new arrangement of her curls gave her an alluring, piquant charm. But she was somehow afraid of the possible dangerous effect on her tenuously enough held position as schoolmarm. The conservative school council would surely never let any more furor about her pass without their notice.

And so, by limiting her travels from cabin to school house, and back again, Cleo was able to keep her secret. There came a Saturday morning, over a week later, however, when she was forced to go into town in order to stock up on provisions. Accordingly, she settled the bright scarf around her head in hood fashion, as best she could, and breathed a few fervent prayers that luck would be on her side.

It was, all right—bad luck.

As she was coming out of the General Store, laden down with packages, she was confronted with the next to the last person in the world she wanted to see.

"Why, Cleo Waring, where have you been keeping yourself?" Millie Peters' shrill voice wanted to know. "I declare I was saying to Stevie only t'other day—'I wonder what's become of our extraordinary little schoolmarm?' "

"Oh, I've been busy," Cleo said feebly. "Really, Millie, we'll have to have a long gossip some other time. Right now I'm in a hurry."

She would have continued on past then, but Millie's hand in the crook of her arm stopped her. Millie Peters was a wholesome collection of femininity, with a figure that no ill wind had full-blown so good, long, dazzling blonde hair, and shoebutton brown eyes that expressively reflected the lady's mood of the moment. Right now, these same brown eyes were shrewdly contemplating the makeshift covering on

Cleo's head. She stared for a minute.

"What a pretty scarf," she said. "And how unusually you've draped it!"

Cleo said, "Mmm," and tried unsuccessfully to shake off the other's clinging hand.

"Do untie it and let me try it on," Millie pursued relentlessly.

Cleo finally disencumbered herself. "I really must go," she said—and made the mistake of preparing to flee.

The very next instant, she heard a swift movement at her back, a brief tearing sound, and a glad cry of triumph. When she spun around, there stood Millie with the scarf in her hands, venomously eyeing Cleo's exposed hairdo.

"I thought so!" the blonde squealed. "You shameful hussy! Not content with openly making up to every pair of britches in town, you've sinfully cut off your hair like an ont-and-out floozy!"

Her loud, raucous tones carried up and down the street, and even as Cleo felt the hot blood rush to her face, folks began to gather around them in a whispering, jeering circle.

She said, quietly, "I'll thank you to hand back my scarf, Millie Peters."

"And I'll thank you to mend your brazen manners," Millie retorted. "The way you've been carrying on—"

"Give me my scarf!"

Millie complied to this fiercely-hissed order—by throwing the disputed piece of material straight into Cleo's face. At that, Cleo very, very carefully set down her bundles, then abruptly straightened up and made a lunge for Millie's streaming, blond hair. She grabbed it and pulled, till the tears shone in the other girl's eyes.

Next, Millie set to scratching and slapping, while between blows, all restraint and sense of decorum gone, Cleo stooped for her groceries and proceeded to execute a recipe that was not to be found in any cook book. The eggs she broke atop Millie's head, the flour she sprayed on strategic parts of Millie's dress, and other ingredients were merely thrown indiscriminately. The crowd howled their appreciation of this farce-like free-for-all.

It was still going strong. Cleo determined to enjoy herself to the last provision, when suddenly she felt herself being jerked out of the fracas. She opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. For Steve Corcoran had precariously planted himself between Cleo and Millie, and now had a skirtful of each squirming combatant in his clutches.

"Let me go!" Cleo cried.

"It was all *her* fault, Stevie," Millie wheedled.

"The *two* of you are comin' with me," Steve said, in such stern, official tones, that both girls fell instantly silent, and the merry throngs cleared a way for them.

To Cleo's dismay she realized that Steve was marching them to the jailhouse.

"Disturbin' the peace, and publicly riotin' in the street," he snapped at the surprised keeper, and without another word, unceremoniously deposited his prisoners in separate cells.

"Ste-vie, you can't *do* this to me," Millie wailed.

"Shut up!" Steve grated. "I told you there oughter be a law again' women—even if I had to go and pass it myself."

CLEO was still too bewildered for speech. Events had taken place so rapidly, so startlingly, that she still wasn't too sure what it was that had actually happened. But the sight of the cold, gray walls of the cell, the little aperture above that served for a window, and Steve, poker-faced, regarding her through the iron bars—awakened her to acute reality.

"It's all your nasty little brother's fault," she shouted. "Wait till I get my hands on him! I'll sting his hide so—"

"Shut up!" Steve said again. And then, astonishingly, "What'd you do with that-there signed paper he brought to school?"

"I tore it up—that's what!" she flung back at him.

For the first time, Steve grinned. "Good," he said. "Then I'm not bound by my promise."

With that, he thrust his hands in through the bars, interlocked them around her neck, and thus drawing her face up close to the narrow opening, leisurely began to kiss her.

Cleo struggled to wrench away, but to no avail. She was firmly pinned in place, and Steve's lips, rough and compelling on hers, had no trouble reducing her motive power to responsive submission. Cleo

knew a good thing when she had it. . . .

"That's cause I know you're safe where you can't get back at me," Steve said when he had released her. "Now behave yourself." And he strode off.

"Well, I like that!" Millie Peters exclaimed.

"I did, too," Cleo said, with something that was very like a sigh.

She heard the jailkeeper raise his voice in the outer room. "See here, sheriff. I won't have huggin' and kissin' and such foolishness goin' on in my hoosegow."

Steve's gruff answer drifted back. "That goes for you the same—shut up!"

I won't sleep a wink tonight in this awful place, Cleo promised herself. But after hours of listening to the outpourings of Millie's acid tongue, and of pacing the uninteresting dimensions of her cell, she was only too glad to welcome the relief of slumber. The keeper's wife had fed her well, and with a feeling almost of contentment, she lay down on the cot and closed her eyes.

The next morning, she washed and breakfasted, exchanged a few unpleasantries with Millie Peters, then patiently settled back to see what the day would bring forth. She didn't have long to wait.

It was Steve who heralded the disaster. He showed up within the hour and stopped at her cell. "You've got visitors, Cleo," he said.

"Visitors?" Dumbfounded, she could only repeat his announcement.

Before he could explain further, there was a commotion in the passageway, and the murmur of many angry voices. And it was with a sinking heart that Cleo viewed the procession now coming into view.

It consisted of four women and two men—Sarah Peters, Millie's mother; Abagail Adams, whose two little girls were among Cleo's pupils; Granny Merritt, who was Buckeye's oldest inhabitant; Lucy Rowe, the spinster seamstress; Henry Thorne, president of the bank; and Ned Burnside. Collectively, this assorted group comprised the local school council.

"So it's true," Mrs. Peters was the first to speak up. "You've cut your hair like a—a common dance hall girl!"

"I told you so, Mama," Millie put in.

Miss Rowe's beady eyes glittered. "Disgraceful," she fumed. "Appearin' nekked-lookin' like that in front of wee children."

"Who's nekked?" Granny Merritt demanded. The old lady was slightly deaf in one ear.

"Humph!" said Henry Thorne, and Cleo smiled at him in gratitude, it was such a neutral expression.

"Her hair is bad enough," Mrs. Adams contributed, "but she's an outlaw as well. And I won't have any jailhouse Jezebel giving ideas to my two little innocents!"

"You mean Millie?" Cleo found the gumption to inquire.

Millie said hastily, "I don't really belong here, Mama. She saw to it that I was blamed, too."

"I know, dear," her mother soothed. "She's a vicious, evil woman."

"Who is? Who? Who?" Granny Merritt said querulously.

Cleo just looked from one council member to another in increasing stupefaction, hardly able to grasp the fact that this demoralizing, abandoned villainess everyone was upbraiding so heatedly, was no poor stranger—but she, herself. She glanced furtively at Steve, but hands jammed in his pockets, he was rocking back and forth on his heels, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"My advice is—take her job away," Miss Rowe was saying. "Above all, we must think of the good of the children."

"And I agree," Mrs. Adams declared. "I won't have Maribelle and little Orchid witnesses to such carousals as must go on in that school house."

Henry Thorne said, "Ladies—" then stopped, evidently unable to think of a suitable statement.

All this while, Ned Burnside had been standing there, not saying a word, but never taking his eyes off Cleo—which only added to her discomfort. But now, turning to Miss Rowe, he said:

"Lucy, it's only just 'n fair that we put it to a vote. We've had all the facts from the sheriff here, and we've all spoken right up with our opinions."

"Well—I reckon we should," Miss Rowe said grudgingly. "But she's still worthless riffraff, and I vote aye—get another schoolmarm."

"I vote aye, too," Mrs. Peters stated promptly.

Henry Thorne cleared his throat. "Nay," he said decisively.

Cleo threw him a still more grateful smile, and Miss Rowe glared at him, but before she could find a fitting epithet, Ned broke in again.

"Nay goes for me, too. How about you, Abigail?"

"The balloting's tied up, two against two," Mrs. Adams said. "And now I'm voting—aye."

That left just one vote. Simultaneously, everyone regarded Granny Merritt.

"What do you say?" Ned asked her in a loud voice.

"Say to what?" Granny Merritt rasped. "What's a-goin' on here anyway?"

"How do you vote—aye or nay?"

Granny Merritt appeared to consider that for a few seconds. Then she cocked her gray head to one side. "Nay," she said waspishly. "When there's a doubt in her mind, a girl should always say no."

Cleo exulted. The balloting was now tied up again. What would happen next?

"Well, Ned," Lucy Rowe demanded. "How is it going to be decided, after all?"

From her cell, Millie Peters said, "I think, in the excitement, you've forgotten something."

"What's that?" two or three asked in unison.

Millie put her hand through the bars, and waved it at Steve. "Your seventh member," she pointed out. "The sheriff is always on the school council. Am I right, Stevie?"

EVEN before he nodded, glumly, Cleo knew that the other girl was correct. And now, Steve would have to cast the deciding vote. It was, she knew, not only a vote for or against her being ousted as schoolmarm—but a choice between *amour* and prejudice. A tell-tale indication as to whether he was in love with her . . . as uncontrollably and helplessly as she was in love with him.

"We're waitin', Sheriff," Mrs. Adams prompted.

Steve came up real close to the bars of Cleo's cell. He stared at her, long and searchingly. And then he said, "I vote aye."

The voices rose and fell all around her, in a swelling tumult, but Cleo was no more aware of them than if they had been the buzz of flies. Steve had renounced her. What matter now if she had lost her job. Nothing was of any importance, save that she had wasted a young and foolish dream on a man made of stone and ice water—and now would never dream again.

Suddenly, she realized that the iron door had been unlatched. It was swinging open, and the jailer was saying, "You're free to go now, ma'am."

She stepped out, slowly, and then halted. For although the others must have departed, Mrs. Peters, Steve and Ned were still standing there. While she hesitated, she saw the jailer release Millie.

"Come along, darling," her mother said. She took Millie's hand, and then turned back to Cleo. "You can be at the school house tomorrow," she told her. "But that will be your last day."

After nodding to Steve and Ned, she sailed out grandly, with her smirking daughter in tow.

"Cleo," Steve began, "I'd like to explain somethin'—"

"Oh, go 'way, *Stevie,*" she said cuttingly. "I don't give a hoot for anything *you* might have to explain."

He started to speak again, then apparently thought better of it. With a curt gesture in farewell, he wheeled and left them.

"Cleo, honey," Ned said, anxiously. "Don't fret about it any. I've done some right smart thinkin', and I'll fix things."

"Fix things?" It was an acid echo. "How can you?"

"You don't want to be a schoolmarm forever, anyhow—"

She smiled, mournfully. "Oh, *that.*"

"Marry me," he urged. "Marry me right pronto, and this whole shebang will blow over in no time."

For a moment there, Cleo was tempted. Why not consent to wed Ned? She would be whitewashed and forgiven, even respected as the wife of a big rancher. And she could laugh and laugh at Steve and all the rest of them—and maybe, sometimes, not even mind the pain of an aching heart.

But she knew, deep down, she'd only be fooling herself, and in the end, Ned would be hurt, too. And in spite of his bluster-

ing ways, he was too kindly and well-meaning to deserve a loveless, deceitful marriage.

And so she shook her head and said, gently, "I'm sorry, Ned, but my answer is no. I have one day of grace coming to me, and then after school tomorrow, I'm gonna be leaving Buckeye. You—just forget all about me."

She thought an ugly look of annoyance swept over his ruddy face, but the next moment decided she had been mistaken. Ned said, pleasantly enough, "You're sure you won't change your mind?"

"I'm afraid I won't ever change my mind, Ned," she said. "It's no different from all those other times you asked me."

But she wasn't imagining the snarl that twisted his mouth at that instant, nor his single, contemptuous exclamation, "Liar!"

"What?" she asked, in unconscious imitation of Granny Merritt. "What's that you said?"

He half mumbled something which she couldn't make out, and then, before she could stop him, he was gone. How curious, Cleo reflected, but forgot about it on her way home.

The remainder of the day seemed interminable, and the night the longest she had ever spent in unhappy sleeplessness. When the sun finally rose on the Monday morn, it was with weary dread that she followed the short, familiar route to the school house.

Her little room seemed to be overflowing with people. Besides the boys in their sturdy overalls, and the girls in their fresh calicoes and ginghams, there sat in a straight and solemn row—the seven council members. Like a row of vultures, Cleo thought. Waiting to swoop down and plunder the leavings of a feast. She took her place at her desk, building up resistance against the moment when she would have to look up again. For she feared that if her eyes met Steve's, without warning, they would lock and be held there forever.

The children must have been informed of what had occurred, for the lesson proceeded orderly and quietly. Even Johnny Corcoran seemed oddly subdued. And so, along about mid-morning, when he raised his hand to recite, she automatically called on him.

He stood up, awkwardly, and shuffled his feet on the wooden floor. And then he blurted, "I reckon I'm sorry I hissed at you t'other day, ma'am, and I'm sorry for misbehavin' and rilin' you all the time, and I'm sorry for all the worryin' I made you, and—" he paused for breath— "I'm sorry you're leavin'." He sat down.

Cleo gave him a misty smile. "Thank you, Johnny," she said softly. "It's—all right."

"It's not all right!" Steve shouted. All at once he was hauling Johnny out of his seat by the left ear, and marching him to the front of the room. "Go ahead. Tell her the rest."

"But, Steve—"

"Go ahead, or I'll whip you here and now!"

Johnny said, in a small voice, "Ma'am, I'm sorry I cut off your hair."

Dizzily, Cleo got up and backed away from them. "Sit down, Johnny," she whispered. "I know you're sorry, but please—please sit down!"

Johnny didn't have to be told twice, but Steve still remained there, immovable, inflexible. "*Now* will you let me explain?" he demanded doggedly.

SHE gave him a fleeting, frightened look, then swerved from his side and raced for the doorway. But before she could reach out for the handle, it was violently turned and opened from the other direction, and someone more erupted into, than entered the room. It appeared to be Millie Peters, and yet, Cleo thought dazedly, it couldn't be!

"Look at me!" the apparition cried. "Oh, just look at me!"

Cleo looked, as did the whole amazed roomful, and what met their startled eyes was a wild-eyed girl, whose once-long, blonde hair had unaccountably been reduced to a cropped, golden residue.

"Millie!" Mrs. Peters was the first to recover her voice, and she did so, screamingly. "What happened? Who cut your beautiful hair?"

Apprehensively, Cleo glanced at Johnny Corcoran, but he, too, was sitting there in open-mouthed bewilderment.

"Ned Burnside!" Millie shrieked. "That's who! Ned Burnside!"

The effect of that pronouncement was more disrupting, if possible, than Johnny's false snake alarm had been. Everyone was trying to talk at once, and the resultant hubbub was so deafening, even Granny Merritt clapped her hands to her ears.

It was Steve who restored peace, by dint of being able to shout louder than anyone else. "Now you—" he pointed an authoritative finger at Ned Burnside—"Talk!"

"Yeah, I cut her hair," Ned said, cowed. "I walked into her house this morning—"

"You mean you galloped in," Millie interrupted. "You seized me and cut my hair, then locked me in the parlor so I couldn't get out. Luckily someone heard me banging on the door."

Ned leered at her. "You told me she'd marry me," he said scornfully. "You told me if we got her kicked out of her job, she'd marry me."

Marry him . . . kicked out of a job . . . . Cleo gasped. "Me," she said. "You're talking about me!"

"Why didn't you marry the fool when he asked you?" Millie screeched. "I told him that if he cut off your hair, it'd lead to trouble for you, and then you'd be only too glad to accept him—so I could have the way clear with Steve. But you didn't, and now look what he's gone and done to me!"

"You mean it was Ned all the time," Cleo said hollowly. "But I thought Johnny. He—he even confessed."

"Steve made me," the boy piped up. "Cause you thought I did it, and you wouldn't let him explain somethin' or other to you."

It was all too much for Cleo. She sank down onto her chair again, and tried to find one little piece in the whole puzzle that made the least bit of sense. It was Ned who had cut her hair, not Johnny. And Steve had something he wanted to explain to her. But what? What could he possibly say, after he had voted against her being schoolmarm?

"I'm leaving," Mrs. Peters was saying. "And as far as I'm concerned you can have your job back, Cleo Waring."

"But Mama—" Millie protested.

"I'll tend to *you* later," her mother said, and half dragged her from the room.

The other council members followed them out, each in turn apologizing to Cleo, and assuring her that she could stay on at the school house. Steve was the last to depart, which he was about to do without so much as a word for her.

"Where do you think you're going, Steve Corcoran?" she called after him in her best, indignant manner.

He paused and grunted. "Just away from here—far away," he said. *"I'm* not sorry for a durn thing. And I wanted you to lose your job. 'Cause after figgerin' and figgerin' on how I could hate women so much, and yet want to keep kissin' you all the time, I gave up and decided I could find out much better if instead of bein' a schoolmarm you were to become the sheriff's missus.

"But it's too late now," he fairly roared. "You had your chance and you muffed it. Women—there still ought to be a law again' 'em!"

Calmly, Cleo reached out and took a firm hold of Steve's ear. "Watch closely, children," she said, "and I will teach you a surefire method of convincing a stubborn man."

It started out with her giving Steve a mere peck, right at the corner of his mouth. But when his arms immediately tightened around her, and he grinned, in that old, expectant way—she barely had time to say, "Children . . . close your eyes, quick!" before his lips were working their magic on hers.

Between the third and fourth kiss, she whispered, breathlessly. "I thought there ought to be a law again' women?"

But it wasn't until after the dozenth that he replied, just as breathlessly, "There ought to be—'cause it's such a heap of fun breakin' it."

THE KISSIN' OF A SHY 'UN

Lovely Mary Ellen was bent on followin' Sue's honkatonk code—until rugged Roger Elton tried to show her his own caressin' creed.

THE dancehall at Silver City shook with the heavy dancing of cowmen, waddies and gamblers out to make the most of a Saturday night. The rhythmic vibrations were like danger signals flashed in the night along the new railroad lines to Mary Ellen Bailey. From the moment she had come through the door tonight she regretted letting Sue Perkins persuade her to come.

The scraping fiddle was too fast and keyed too high for good dancing. There was something in the grinning faces of the men and women that frightened Mary Ellen. They were grimly determined to have a good time at any price. Their very determination, the set smiles on their vacant, wooden faces, told her this was no place to find love or companionship. Here she would find only counterfeits.

Standing side by side, Mary Ellen and Sue looked as different as night and day. Mary Ellen was a fragile, blonde girl whose beauty was so delicate as to be almost colorless under the garish oil lamps. The simple crinolin dress she wore fitted her exactly and she looked cool and demure, even in that dancehall.

Sue had flaming auburn hair and a bright green dress that was more at home in the hurly-burly of the place. The tight dress revealed the fullness of her figure, and her hair was a challenge to very man in the place.

"Watch that one," Sue nudged Mary Ellen and nodded across the room to a willowy blonde. "She's got your coloring—but she knows what to do with it. Watch her. She knows all the answers." There was a gleam of admiration and envy in Sue's eyes.

Mary Ellen watched shyly. From the back of the room it looked simple. The blonde girl merely smiled and lifted her eyebrows at a substantial-looking cowman lounging against the bar. He smiled back, elbowed his way through the crowd to her. Mary Ellen watched them exchange a few words and dance away together.

Obviously the blonde girl wasn't lonely and unhappy as Mary Ellen was. Still, she frowned. "It looks easy enough, Sue, only I don't like it." She hesitated. "There's something cheap about it."

Anger flared in Sue's eyes and she flushed deeply. "What's wrong with it? Are you too good for the people of Silver City? Is that it?"

"Oh, no," Mary Ellen hastened to assure her.

"Well, you're not in the country anymore. This is the way things are done in Silver City."

Mary Ellen nodded. Sue never let a chance go by to remind her that she was nothing but a green kid, fresh from the ranch. Ever since she got the job in the Fargo Express Office and had moved into the boarding house with Sue she had been wanting to meet people and have a good time as Sue did. But there wasn't anyone at the boarding house except more lonely girls like herself.

"If you're ever going to meet any men," Sue said tartly, "this is the way to do it. Either here or at Rainbow's End. All the girls do it. Come on, Mary Ellen. Don't be such a sissy!"

By Val Gendron

Sue had warned her: "You have to keep 'em talking. When they go dead on you — you're finished."

Mary Ellen smiled thinly. "I guess you're right."

"Of course I'm right. Heavens, you don't want to sit around night after night looking at the four walls of our bedroom, do you?" Sue's voice was gentler, more sympathetic now.

Ever since Mary Ellen had come to Silver City she'd envied Sue the dates she had. Sue was out every night, and had lots of different fellows. It seemed to Mary Ellen that Sue knew everybody in town.

"It's just different from what I'm used to," Mary Ellen reminded her apologetically. "But I'll learn. Just give me a little time to get used to the idea."

But Sue wasn't paying attention anymore. She was watching two tall cowboys ambling across the room. She patted her hair to be sure it was in place.

"Here come some now," she whispered. "Let them know you want to be friendly. Don't act stiff and formal. Act like you want to know them, and don't give them the cold shoulder," she finished warningly.

The two cowboys were watching them intently. Mary Ellen could feel their eyes sweeping over her, appraisingly.

"Hello," the tall, smooth one who seemed the oldest said. He grinned down at Sue. "Haven't we met before?"

There was something hard and forced about his grin and Mary Ellen didn't like it. It made her uncomfortable. She looked quickly at the other one. He stood hesitating, as if waiting to learn how things would turn out before he said anything. He glanced from Sue to Mary Ellen and for a moment their eyes met.

Then Mary Ellen dropped hers quickly. But before she did, she had seen the impression of astonishment in his eyes when he looked at her. It was as if he sensed Mary Ellen's embarrassment, her uneasiness.

"Well, if I didn't see you here, it was at Rainbow's End," the first one was saying to Sue.

Sue laughed. "Does it matter?" she asked tauntingly, raising her eyebrows significantly.

"Not at all!" He smiled almost gaily, and taking the arm of the other cowhand pushed him forward. "This is my saddle pal, Roger Elton. I'm Tom Farley."

"I'm Sue Perkins. . . . Mary Ellen, I want you to meet two very old and very dear friends of mine. This is Mary Ellen Bailey."

"Hello," Roger said. His voice was deep and pleasant and his smile was nice and unassuming. Not a bit like the hard grin that Tom kept pasted on his face. Mary Ellen liked his manner, too, the shy way he had of standing with his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"Like to dance?" Tom asked gaily.

"I sure would," Sue answered quickly.

Tom turned to Roger and winked gravely, then turned to Sue. "Roger here is so busy saving money for a herd that he can't see, hear or think anything but cow critters. I had to practically hogtie him to get him to come here for a little fun. What do you think now, Roger?"

"I'm two jumps ahead of you, Tom." Roger laughed and put his arm around Mary Ellen. "Let's dance!" Before she could answer, he had swept her out on the small but crowded dancefloor.

SHE could feel the warmth of his hand on her back as he pulled her to him, could feel his breath stir the soft blonde hair that curled close to her head. She was aware of his body moving in rhythm to the music close to hers. As he danced her away she heard Sue chattering brightly to Tom.

Roger guided her skillfully though the maze of the dance. "You come here often?" he asked casually.

Mary Ellen tried to remember all the things Sue had told her about the men of Silver City. Although it was the first time in her life she had ever put foot inside a dancehall, she knew she wasn't supposed to let Roger know how green she was. She remembered that Sue had told her to keep everything she said bright and gay.

"Quite often," she lied. Having taken the plunge it was easier to go on. "I think the music's better at the Rainbow," she said, and hoped desperately that it was. Though she couldn't see how it could be any worse than the scraping fiddle they were dancing to.

"Yep. Good music at the Rainbow." He didn't seem to have anything more to

say, and Mary Ellen was afraid that he was finding her dull. According to Sue, being dull was the worst thing you could do.

"You dance well," she said eagerly, smiling bravely to hide her growing consternation. As a matter of fact it was true. Roger did dance very well. He didn't dance wildly, capering all over the little dancefloor the way Tom did, nor did he hold her too closely like some of the men were doing.

"Thanks." He smiled, and it was a genuine, friendly smile. "I like to dance with you. You pay attention to the music, follow it and me. Not like some of the girls you meet—" He broke off suddenly, his smile faded and he assumed the same hard, forced smile that Tom wore constantly.

An awkward silence grew, and Roger held her closer, seemed grimly intent on imitating everything that Tom Farley did. Mary Ellen hated the silence, remembered what Sue had warned her! *"You have to keep 'em talking. When they go dead on you—you're finished."*

Mary Ellen searched her mind desperately for something to say. "You and Tom go around together?" she asked lamely.

"Yep. We work out of the same bunkhouse. Tom's a swell guy. He's the life of the party. That boy can tell the funniest stories, and sing the zanyiest songs. He keeps us in stitches all the time."

Then the music came to an end, and they stood uncertainly in the middle of the floor waiting for the fiddler to begin another piece. Mary Ellen looked around for Sue. She and Tom were standing in the shadows and he was still holding her close while he bent to whisper something in her ear.

As Mary Ellen watched, she saw them turn and walk into the shadows under the balcony.

"Look, Roger," she said. "There go Sue and Tom. Shall we join them?"

He looked across the room, and the knowing grin that he wore on his face hardened. "They look like they want to be left alone." The music started again. "Shall we dance?" he asked abruptly.

Once more they were moving in time to the music and she liked the 'feel' of Roger's strong, muscular arms about her.

"Tell me about the herd you're getting together," she suggested brightly. She was really interested; she didn't ask because she remembered that Sue had told her to show an interest in the things a man was doing.

"It's nothing much," he said modestly. "A few cows and some mavericks the boss let me brand. Tom says I'm crazy. He says when you work for a man he's got to pay you whether or no. But a blizzard could wipe out my profits for three years and like as not I'd starve to death. He could be right, only—"

"Only you don't want to be herding someone else's cows and dogies all your life," she broke in.

His face lit up. "That's right. Jim Turney—that's the boss—said he started the same way, working his cattle in with his boss's. Now he's got five thousand head of cattle, one of the finest ranches in the country, a big house and thirty men working for him. But like Tom says, Jim started when things were different—"

"Why do you listen to Tom all the time?" Mary Ellen cut in angrily. She didn't mean to be so serious, but she liked Roger. He was like the boys back home. They wanted places of their own, too. They were willing to work for them, and she knew Roger was also. He deserved something better than to ride herd on another man's cattle all his life.

"You're a funny girl," he said, smiling down at her. His eyes were gentle and serious.

"Funny?"

"Yep. You're not like most girls one meets." He shrugged to indicate the dancehall, and Mary Ellen flushed, knowing he thought she was a dancehall girl.

"What I mean is," he stumbled on, redfaced, "you really act like you're interested. You—you don't often meet a girl that's really interested in critters and things."

Mary Ellen laughed. "I grew up on a ranch. I know all about how much work there is to running a ranch."

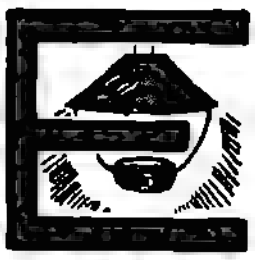
"You do?" He laughed down at her, and looking up into his eyes she could see he didn't believe her.

Then Mary Ellen remembered that Sue had told her never to get too serious, that

men didn't like serious girls. It was suddenly terribly important that Roger should like her.

She laughed self-consciously. "We've gotten so serious we're just standing, talking and letting all that music go to waste. It's a pity with you coming to town so seldom."

He concentrated on his dancing then, and she noticed with dismay that the hard, forced grin had come back to his face. When the music ended, she realized that he had waltzed her over into a corner of deep shadows. .



VEN after the music stopped, he still held her close in his arms. He had maneuvered her into a corner and her back was against the wall. It occurred to her suddenly that he was going to kiss her. She didn't want him to, not like this—not a stolen kiss in the shadows of a honkatonk.

"Let's find Sue and Tom," she suggested.

"They're busy," he said bluntly.

He was bending over her now, and in a minute he would kiss her. She twisted free. "Let's find them," she urged.

"What's the matter?" His voice was hard and cold. "I thought you liked me. Dancing out there, I thought you wanted to."

How could she tell him she wanted him to kiss her, but not this way?"

"Maybe you don't like me," he went on. "Okay, I'm no ladies' man. But as Tom says, there're plenty of girls who will." He turned swiftly. "It was nice meeting you," he announced formally.

Mary Ellen laid her hand on his arm to detain him. "Roger, please!"

He hesitated.

"I do like you. I like you a lot." Her eyes fell before his. "Don't go."

He slipped his arm around her again. She could feel him drawing her close.

"Roger—"

"You know someplace to go?" His words cut like steel and were cold as ice.

"No."

He pulled her close, not as if he loved her but as though it was something to do. "There ought to be more privacy for things like this," he murmured, as his fingers softly caressed her blonde hair.

Then he bent swiftly and kissed her. Mary Ellen closed her eyes hard to keep back the tears. This wasn't what she wanted. She had liked him so much she wanted him to like her in the same way.

His lips were rough with demand, but slowly as he held her in his arms he became gentle. Her heart swelled as she felt the change in him. All the loneliness that had oppressed her since she had come to Silver City seemed to vanish under the magic of his lips. It was as if all the romance for which her heart longed had found fulfillment at last.

"Mary Ellen," he whispered, "Mary Ellen, darling."

Unashamed now, she clung to him, finding strength and happiness in the sweetness of their embrace.

Suddenly she was dashed back to earth. Tom Farley was slapping Roger on the back, yelling like an Injun. "Atta boy! For a tenderfoot, kid, you're doing all right!"

Quickly Mary Ellen stepped out of Roger's arms, her face flaming red.

Roger was blushing, too. "Cut it out!" he grumbled half-heartedly.

"You're green," Tom said. "You're too green to be left alone for long. Good thing I came along. No telling what trouble you might get yourself into." Then Tom waved an admonishing hand and swept Sue back on the crowded dance-hall.

Roger shook his head in embarrassment. "Gosh, I'm sorry. But the way you were kissing me I didn't even know the music had started again."

She turned away quickly to hide her tears. It was all ruined now. Everything was different. It was spoiled. Tom had made it wrong again.

Roger pulled her to him once more and kissed her. But it wasn't the same. All the tenderness, the romance, was gone from it. "Let's dance." She twisted out of his arms.

"I guess we'd better." The funny grin, which she had come to hate because she knew he imitated Tom when he did it, spread over his face once more.

When the dance was over, they found themselves standing close to Sue and Tom.

"I want to freshen up," Mary Ellen said urgently. She took Sue's hand. "Come on."

Sue laughed and excused herself. "You boys stay right here, and we'll be back in a jiff."

Tom winked. "We'll be waiting."

When they were alone Sue looked at Mary Ellen sharply. "You seem to be doing all right with that cowhand. Doesn't look like you need any lessons from me."

Mary Ellen was close to tears. "Oh, Sue, it was awful. When Tom came and found us I could have sunk right through the floor."

Sue patted her shoulder. "Now honey, don't take on that way. Tom just wanted a little joke."

"You don't understand." Mary Ellen's eyes were bright with tears. "I like Roger. I like him an awful lot. In fact, I think I'm in love with him. He thinks I'm just a honkatonk girl—"

"Now wait a minute," Sue broke in. "You just met that waddie!"

"I feel as if I'd known him all my life," Mary Ellen said seriously. "I know I'm in love with him. I couldn't be more in love with him if we'd grown up together. Now it's all ruined. Nothing can ever, ever come of it."

Sue listened carefully. There was something in the urgency with which Mary Ellen spoke that convinced her. "I suppose you can fall in love that way," she murmured thoughtfully.

"What am I going to do?" Mary Ellen asked. She turned and paced the floor. "I never should have come here. I knew that all along."

"Don't be silly," Sue said. "If you hadn't come you'd never have met him." Her brow furrowed. "I'll tell you what," she announced brightly. "You dance with Tom and I'll talk to Roger. I'll tell him what a sweet kid you are."

"I don't see how that'll help." Mary Ellen powdered her nose and smoothed away the last trace of tears. "That'll just make it worse. He thinks I'll dance with any man, let any man kiss me. Men like Roger never marry women like that. You know they don't."

"I'll fix it," Sue assured her. "Now we've got to hurry back."

Mary Ellen stopped. "Or they'll pick

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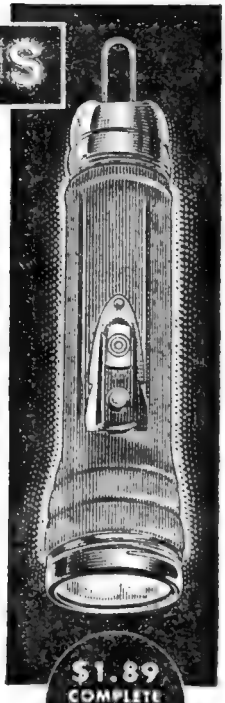

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up two other girls—isn't that what you mean?"

"Be sensible." Sue took her hand, pulled her to the door of the dancehall. "You want me to talk to him, don't you? Then let's go."

"Maybe he won't believe you. Maybe he'll just laugh at you. Oh Sue, I couldn't bear that! Or maybe he'll say, 'okay it's nice I'm a good girl, but all he was looking for was a good time.' "

Sue nearly bit her lips in exasperation. "Come on, Mary Ellen. Leave it to Madam Cupid. I'll straighten out your boy friend for you."

Tom was laughing boisterously when they got back and Roger looked as miserable as Mary Ellen felt. He was standing with his shoulders hunched and his hands thrust deep in his pockets and a hang-dog expression on his face.

He avoided Mary Ellen's eyes. That hard, determined grin was plastered all over his face. He turned to Sue. "You girls all prettied up again?"

Sue laughed. "We'll do."

Tom laughed loudly. "I'll say you will. Any time. Any place." He made it sound wrong. "How about changing partners for this dance?"

That was exactly what Sue wanted and she moved quickly to Roger. "You're the strong silent type—quite the contrast for Tommy. I'd like a change. How about you, pardner?"

"Okay with me," Roger replied.

Then Tom took Mary Ellen in his arms. He held her painfully close. It was awful dancing with Tom after Roger. She could feel his arms around her, holding her a little too tightly.

"You're quite a little number," he whispered between his teeth. "No wonder Roger fell for you."

"Roger?" Then they had been talking about her. "What did he say?" She smiled up at Tom. Two could play this game.

Tom squeezed her significantly. "He likes you, baby. He thinks you're cute. Matter of fact, so do I."

He was dancing her into the shadows under the balcony. To the same place where, a little while ago, Roger had kissed her. A little while ago. It seemed ages. She wished the music would end.

NOW SHE knew what Tom was up to. He was proving what kind of girl she was. He was proving that any man could kiss her. She felt sick inside. She wanted to get away.

The music stopped, but Tom didn't release her. He bent his head to hers. "Come on, baby, how about a kiss? Roger says you're something!"

"No!" She struggled to get away from him. Her face was flaming. She hated him. At that moment she hated Roger, too. Talking about her kisses with Tom, making light of them, telling Tom he'd like them too. She had been right in the first place, she never should have come to a place like this. She wanted fun, but she didn't want this.

Tom's arms were strong and held her pinioned against the wall while his lips sought hers.

"No!" she cried. "Let me go. I want to go home!"

"Listen," Tom's voice was soothing. "I like you. I told you that. I like you as much as Roger does. You kissed him—you'll kiss me!"

Then she saw Roger. He was standing not three feet away with Sue, and his face was dark with anger. He strode over to Tom and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"You heard what Mary Ellen said. No!"

"What's the matter with you?" Tom demanded. "I'm only trying to help you." He still held Mary Ellen close. "I'm just trying to show you what a fool you are to lose your head over a cheap honka-tonk gal. They're all alike."

"Let her alone." Roger's voice was coldly polite.

"Aw shucks, kid. You're green and don't understand these women."

Roger spun Tom around and his fist smashed into Tom's face. The blow was so hard and swift that it seemed to come all the way from the ground. Tom staggered back, his hand to his jaw.

"Listen, kid, I'm your pardner. I don't want to fight. Certainly not over a snip of a girl."

"Shut up!" Roger shouted. He took Mary Ellen's arm. "Come on," he said, "let's get out of here."

(Please continue on page 97)

QUEEN of the DANCE

AT THE end of the meal, the strolling players were replaced with a dance orchestra and the tables cleared from the floor. Nedra danced first with a young Mexican army officer who seemed to have been born with rhythm in his body, then with a somewhat lumbering American rancher.

The latter told her: "There've been lots of pretty girls in this country during the past few years, but you're the only one for whom Bill McVeigh ever staged a fiesta." His bright, shrewd gray eyes looked at her thoughtfully.

When they returned to a small table at the edge of the dance floor, Bill McVeigh said: "I think waiting out two dances is courteous enough for any host. This next dance is mine."

The music began on a high, half-savage note. Then it dropped to a low, fast waltz-beat, holding minor tones and motivated by a drum-beat such as she had never heard before. It was a beat that first stirred the blood and then became part of it, matching the movement of one's heart until it lifted to reckless acceptance.

Then the musicians began to chant a plaintive phrase to the almost barbaric melody: "Ah . . . *la Linda mujer*. . . ."

Nedra's glance went to Bill McVeigh's eyes.

He smiled. "I told them to keep playing it until we stopped dancing. Ready?"

"Yes."

She stood and he grinned down at her, his blue eyes changing, becoming darker. "You couldn't be safer, Nedra. Every Mexican here, having broken bread with you as an honored guest, would protect you at the cost of his life."

"What makes you think—?" she began, but stopped as he took her in his arms. Her breath caught as his arms went around her, as she was brought close in their hard grip.

The music did not require patterned dancing but surrender to itself, making the steps effortless and leaving the senses free to understand the wistful minor sobbing for the unattainable. Nedra and Bill were not just a dancing couple. They were one entity moving to the command of the music. She had become a part of Bill McVeigh and he part of her. There could be no thinking or choice.

Realizing that, Nedra lost her oneness with the rhythm and again became helplessly conscious of him. Aware of the pound of his heart and the blood pulsing through his flesh, of the shape of his face and the curve of his mouth.

Sensing her abrupt withdrawal, his arms tightened and his blue glance moved down to her eyes, thrusting against their surface. "I knew it'd be like this, dancing together to your song," he said. "Don't go away, now. You'd spoil it."

She told herself: *Then I have to spoil it. If I go on dancing with him like this, I'll forget too many things—such as Beverly Howard.*

"Let's stop," she said aloud. "This has been a very long dance."

"Whatever you want." But his face changed, seemed closed against her.

As they left the floor, a girl moved directly into their path. A dark, vital, pretty girl. Beverly Howard.

"Hi," she said, her voice rough. "Hello, Miss Williams."

Nedra stopped. The pagan intoxication of the music was entirely gone. Beverly, dressed in white, was lovely as a dark, tropic flower. She was looking at Bill McVeigh with angry, claiming eyes.

"I heard you were giving a fiesta, Bill —and wondered why I wasn't invited. So I came over to find out."

McVeigh hesitated. Finally he grinned, but the grin was uncomfortable and half apologetic. "I knew there was something I'd forgotten, Bev," he said. "Been bothering me all evening. I'm sorry. I certainly intended to ask you."

"I'd like to believe that." The dark girl's glance slid to Nedra. Her face held none of the friendliness which had been on it a few hours before. . . .

Romantic proof that "Fiesta Kisses Are Sweetest" is given in Marian O'Hearn's new novel, which will appear in July RANGELAND ROMANCES—published June 25th.

—The Editor.

CALL OF THE WITCH GODDESS

Just when Libbie was getting deliciously fascinated, her desert dream-man snubbed her luscious charms for the lure of gold—and the enticing mystery of exotic Lyama.

♥ ♥

CHAPTER ONE

Desert Rescue

LIBBIE told herself that the thin cloud spreading over the sun was meaningless. Ignoring the sudden sharpening of the breeze, she pushed her heels into the pony's sides hurrying him toward the Arivaipa Hills.

But darker clouds boiled across the sky, and in seconds the breeze became a roaring, twisting wind. Sheets of sand were lifted and flung high into the air, dimming the sun's light to a sullen red glow.

Libbie pulled her neckerchief up over her face and wheeled the pony, heading him away from the storm. Spiraling dust cut at her eyes, and the sand, driving through her clothing, burned her flesh.

There was no chance, now, of reaching the hills. And that meant another day of waiting, another twenty-four hours which might be enough for the desert to conceal all trace of her father.

The wind gathered itself and struck like a great, crushing fist. She loosened the reins and let the pony run before it.

The sand slowed him to a stumbling walk, and the girl's hands closed convulsively on the reins. She must travel due west, must hold the horse in an unswerving line. If he drifted with the storm, she might find herself lost in the desert. . . .

The little animal's fast, hard breathing wavered. He gave a strangled cough and halted, hoofs settling into the sand, body hunched against the wind.

Thrilling Novelette of Southwest Sweethearts

By Marian O'Hearn

"Jack—" Lyama said—"let me explain this dreadful thing. . . ."

♥ ♥

Libbie knotted the reins and got down, holding onto a stirrup to brace herself as she stepped cautiously to the pony's head. Gripping his cheek-strap, she started to lead him. Her slight body swayed before the pounding of the wind.

A solid blast of sand whirled up and the horse shied in panic. Libbie's grip on the cheek-strap broke, and she was thrown

to her knees. Then the wind caught her, hurling her before it. A single, shrill scream tore from her throat. Clawing with hands and feet, she tried to dig into the ground, but the shifting sand gave as easily as water. Then the wind loosened its grip for a moment, and again she clawed desperately at the sliding earth, while the raw gasping from her own throat filled her ears.

Suddenly wild hope filled her. Something, someone was near her!

Hands were grasping her shoulders, fighting the wind. She let her body go limp, thinking: "There's no one here. I'm losing consciousness and imagining I'm not alone."

Yet the hands touching her seemed real. Hard, determined hands. They lifted and carried her and she was being borne by someone who lurched and staggered, halted and fought for breath against the maniacal wind.

Then, abruptly, the wind was gone, and the sand was no longer whipping her face with millions of hot needles. She could still hear the wind's shrill howling, but it was no longer tearing at her. Nor was sand driving like needles through her clothing.

She felt herself being lowered to the ground. She opened her eyes and discovered that she was in a narrow gully, close to a straight wall of rock that protected her from the howling storm. A man was lying beside her, face down against the earth.

Libbie gasped, not believing what she saw, still not able to realize that she was safe. She pulled her gaze from the man, stared at the churning storm and then looked at him again. Yes, it was true. Somehow he had freed her from the wind and carried her here where she could breathe.

The man had not moved or lifted his head. Sounds of labored breathing came from his throat, and, under a sand-encrusted shirt, the muscles of his back were knotted with effort.

He was tall and long-legged. A gun holster, strapped against one thigh, was filled with sand. He had probably lost the gun while carrying her through the storm. His hair, in spite of the sheathing of sand, was brilliantly blond, almost golden.

SHE stirred and brushed her own tangled hair back from her face. A faint warmth was touching her, lifting her pulses and driving some of the chill from her flesh. Few men alone and afoot in a desert storm would attempt such a rescue, knowing the desperate odds.

His harsh breathing quieted, and his shoulders no longer shook with his struggle. Finally, his head came up. He peered at her with bloodshot eyes. "You're—all right?"

"Yes—although it's hard to believe. It just isn't possible to do what you did!"

He lifted himself a little higher. "Had to." His voice returned in a cracked spurt. "Anything's possible—when it's necessary."

His face was raw from the driven sand, but there was breadth and balance in the shape of his forehead. His mouth was clearly drawn and steady. More than that, it was stamped with a puzzling decisiveness.

When he sat up, she noticed his hands, which were as puzzling as his mouth. They were smooth-skinned and supple, the fingers oddly sensitive and sure. They seemed to belong neither on the desert nor on the range.

The faint, swift warmth moved through her again. He was obviously a stranger, knowing nothing of the desert's witch-tricks, yet he had fought off death when it had been only minutes away. That meant an unusual kind of courage.

Becoming aware of his steady, measuring gaze, she got to her feet and peered out at the maelstrom screaming past them.

"You'd better take it easy for awhile," the man said. "Are you sure you feel all right? Even a few minutes in a sandstorm can do serious things."

She sat down again. "I feel fine. What about you?"

He nodded, and the odd decisiveness of his mouth was even more apparent. "I'm coming out of it fast. Don't seem to have breathed in any sand."

Libbie's glance dropped back to his hands, and she remembered where she had seen hands like his. On a trip to Murdock City, her father had taken her to the Silver Casino gambling house. As she moved from table to table to observe the

games, she had noticed that every dealer's hands were strong, flexible and smooth.

Abruptly, she looked up at his face. His eyes, recovering from wind and sand, were a silver gray so clear that the pupils seemed very black. Their depths held something like a faint smile, yet they were frankly measuring.

She folded her hands together and felt her pulses stir warmth under her fingertips. "We may be here for quite a while," she said. "A desert storm can blow out in half an hour or go on for days."

He nodded and shifted his tall body until his back was against the rock, his long legs stretched out before him. "Nothing about the desert can surprise me. Or at least I thought that until today. When I first saw you, I was sure I'd gone loco. Beautiful girls don't turn up, alone, in the middle of a sandstorm."

Surprise flashed through Libbie. They were still surrounded by the deadly wind which had almost destroyed them, and yet he was paying her compliments.

She smiled and light-flecks ran across the surface of eyes which were the shaded blue of wild lilac. She knew that only wild lilac were the same misty, surprising blue and that her lashes were smoky shadows surrounding them. And as her lips curved, she remembered their soft, cerise brilliance.

She was conscious that her rich brown hair made the most of her fair skin and accentuated the smooth contours of her face. She was also aware of the complete femininity of her figure, which not even the dust-stained levis and begrimed flannel shirt could disguise.

Even now, storm-battered and sand-smudged, her loveliness was apparent. She understood and accepted that, as she accepted the sky or the dark outline of the hills. But she said:

"Maybe any girl would seem beautiful in the middle of this desert. It's the—surprise element."

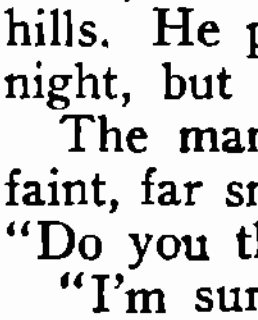
"That's not true and you know it. Just as you know all about yourself."

Libbie's mist-blue eyes darkened with surprise. "All about myself? What makes you think that?"

"Because girls like you always recognize their own beauty. The knowledge is born in them."

Her smile halted and she could think of nothing to say.

He broke the silence almost sharply: "Just how *did* you happen to be out here alone?"



THE color dropped out of her face as she remembered. Realization struck with the force of a stunning fist, and her nerves crawled into the tight knot of fear which had been part of her for so long.

"I was on my way to the Arivaipa Hills. I should have turned back at the first sign of a storm."

"Why didn't you?"

"I couldn't go on waiting and doing nothing," Libbie said, but she was thinking out loud, not answering his question. "I had to find out, try to discover what had happened—" Her words dwindled to a stop. She continued swiftly: "You see, my father left our ranch, the Crossed Stick, three days ago for a trip into the hills. He promised to be back the same night, but he hasn't returned."

The man's face was very quiet. The faint, far smile was no longer in his eyes. "Do you think he had an accident?"

"I'm sure of it. He didn't plan to be away more than a few hours. And on the desert. . . ."

"But you're only guessing," he broke in. "Naturally you're frightened, but your father must know this country and how to take care of himself. If a man understands the desert, he usually comes through."

Libbie's glance flickered against his. "But other things—anything could've happened."

"What other things?"

She hesitated, wondering at the cool probing of his eyes. "This," she said finally, indicating the storm, "would be too much for even the toughest desert rat."

His gaze became pointed metal as it moved from her mouth to her eyes. He said: "Have you tried to get help? Asked the Territorial Rangers or the sheriff's office to send out searching parties?"

Again Libbie hesitated. "No. Neither the rangers nor the sheriff have enough men for a fast, organized hunt. Anything

less than that would just be useless."

He pulled a sack of tobacco and some crumpled papers from a pocket. Rolling a cigarette in smooth, deft fingers, he lighted it and looked at her through the smoke. "Still, in your place I'd have tried. Even a single ranger'd have a chance of picking up his trail faster than you could."

She did not answer. When he, too, remained silent, she studied him through lowered lashes. He was watching the storm, and there were deep, tight lines between his sun-bleached brows.

He turned his head abruptly. "My name's McPherson," he said. "Jack McPherson. My friends call me 'Mac' and others call me 'Doc.' "

"Doc?" she repeated.

He nodded. "That's short for John W. McPherson, M.D."

"A doctor!" The heavy lashes spread widely apart and then swiftly veiled her eyes. "On the desert?"

He grinned and his mouth, losing some of its decisiveness, became very young. "Is there a rule against it?"

"No-o. But usually there are just two reasons why anyone travels around this desert alone: stray cattle—or gold."

McPherson's grin widened. "Indian gold, I suppose. Every Indian tribe has its gold mine or cache, according to the yarns. Most of the stories picture the desert as one vast gold field."

The girl's cerise-bright lips curved into a slow smile while her eyes watched his, trying to define the measuring quality in their depths. "Maybe it is," she murmured.

Then she started to her feet, aware of the sudden stillness. The wind had stopped. The storm was over.

"But what about a little information from you?" McPherson asked, rising also. "The only thing you've told me is that you live on a ranch called the Crossed Stick."

She tilted her head to look up at him, and the strange, new warmth flickered through her again. He was even taller than she had thought. And younger. His grin was a little crooked, and the sun had turned his hair into brilliant gold.

"I'm Libbie Farrell," she said. "My first name is really Elizabeth, but I can't remember ever having been called—"

The bark of a gun wiped out her words.

CHAPTER TWO

"Call Me Lyama"

LIBBIE froze as the single shot echoed and re-echoed over the desert. Ice was cascading over her body, chilling flesh and nerves, holding her motionless. The gun had been close—not more than a few yards away—but she could see nothing. She and Jack McPherson were alone in the gully.

She realized, then, that he was running for the open, toward the place from which the gunfire had come. "No!" she cried, running after him. "Don't go out there!"

"Stay where you are," he called. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"No!" Her voice was a piercing scream.

He stopped and looked down at her with eyes which seemed too thinly gray. "Get hold of yourself," he said harshly. "This isn't a convenient time for hysterics. I've got to have a look around. That shot may have been a signal for help or—" He broke off and the pupils of his eyes became black flames. "Keep still and don't follow me."

Libbie's shoulders sagged and she swayed toward him. He caught her and she clung to him.

"Please," she said. "It's dangerous to rush out there, unarmed, not knowing what you may face. Anything might happen. I was wrong when I said only two reasons sent men to the desert. Lots of them are criminals—killers—hiding out from the law!"

"Suppose one of these criminals has just committed another crime?" His voice was a thin, chill knife. "Suppose he left behind a wounded man who needs help?"

Libbie shook her head and clung even more determinedly. "How can you help? We're afoot, without guns or water. There's nothing we can do for—anyone."

The silver-gray glance measured her, probing for her thoughts. "All right," he said. "What if I agree? What do we do then?"

"Get out of here. Forget all about hear-

ing a shot. Forget everything that's happened."

His mouth settled into its oddly decisive lines. "In that case, you'd better tell me what you suspect—what you're afraid of. You may have been looking for your father, but you're terrified about something else. Maybe he fired that shot."

"No." She said the word on a long, indrawn breath.

"You can't be sure. Do you still want to forget all about it?"

"Yes."

McPherson said: "Then we'll start looking for a way out. We'll go through the other end of the gully."

She tilted her head and stared up at his face. "You won't try to turn back later?"

"No." The pupils of his eyes were small, black flames. "I'll lead the way. We'd better be as quiet as possible."

He strode past her, moving up the gully with long, even strides. Libbie, stumbling over the rocky bottom, kept her gaze on his bright head until he disappeared.

Libbie walked faster, but at the point where she had thought the narrow gulch must end, she discovered it angled sharply east. Here the depression was slighter, offering little protection from the wind, and great, jagged rocks, swept bare of sand, thrust up from the ground.

Jack McPherson was on his knees, examining the stones.

"What is it?" she asked.

McPherson did not answer, and Libbie sensed a sudden, new tension in him.

"What's happened?" she asked. "You act as if you'd found something important."

"I have." He held out his hand, and the light glinted on broken dusky-sheened fragments of stone.

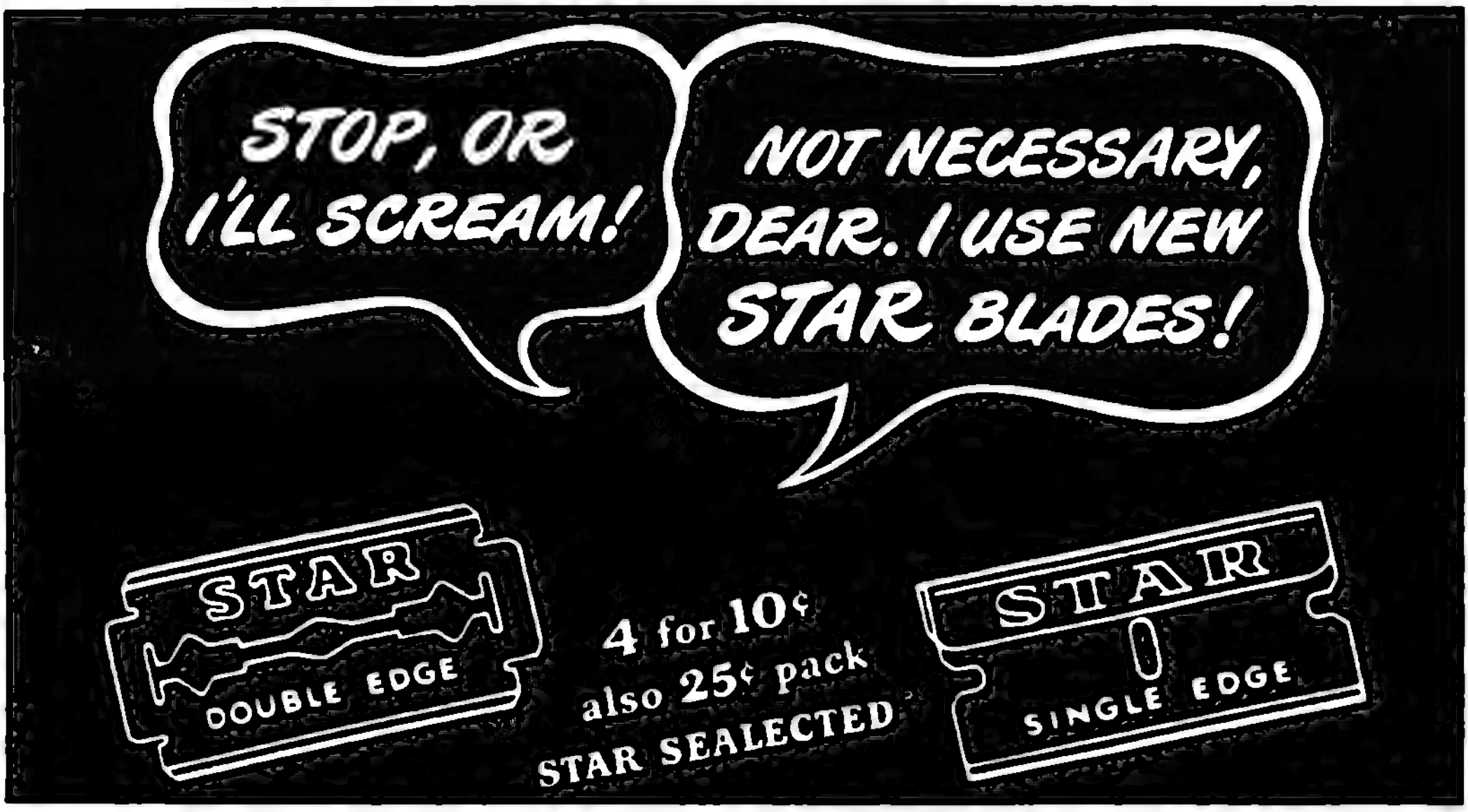
"I don't understand," she began, but her voice cut off and her throat turned dry. The dusky sheen had become a dancing, blinding mist.

Jack McPherson rose, still holding the fragments. "Gold," he said softly. "A nugget of almost solid gold. And all the rest—" he indicated the gully floor— "is the same thing.

The dryness of Libbie's throat was hot, searing pain.

"Think!" McPherson said in the same low, hoarse tone. "There're millions in gold here, waiting to be picked up!"

The black flame of his eyes, the taut excitement gathering behind his face, the feverish reckless dreams springing to crazy life—Libbie had seen all those things before. She had seen them in the faces of many men—and she had also witnessed what they brought. More gold-maddened human beings; streams of miners and prospectors; hordes of criminals.



But each new charge toward freshly discovered riches had halted in a defeat which drove back the greedy stampede. The desert knew how to keep its secrets and its gold. Permitting men occasional, brief glimpses of treasure was merely another of the desert's witch-tricks.

"Here." McPherson knelt and scooped up some of the stones. "We'll carry as much as we can. As soon as I reach town, I'll file on the claim for both of us. We'll make it a joint ownership."

Libbie did not speak or move. She let him fill her pockets with the nuggets and watched him pack them into his own. When he had finished, she said: "We'd better get started. It won't be pleasant to spend the night out here on the desert."

E STRAIGHTENED and the tenseness left him. The black flames in his eyes dimmed, revealing their clear, silver-gray. "I'm sorry, Libbie," he said. "Guess I went a little loco at the sight of so much gold."

His mouth was young again and his hair brilliant in the light, but his supple fingers still played with the nuggets. Strange that the gold-fever had claimed him so swiftly—a physician, a man who had chosen a life of service.

But maybe he was not really a doctor. He could have told her that to avoid revealing facts he didn't want known. The dealers in the Silver Casino had been much like him. Young, sharp-eyed and sure of themselves.

McPherson grinned and dropped the last of the stones into a pocket. "You're looking at me as if I were insane or worse. Is it as bad as all that?"

Her lips parted but she caught back her words and moved past him. "We've wasted too much time here already. It'll soon be sunset."

"Wait." He touched her shoulder, and she remembered, sharply, the warmth of his flesh under her finger tips. "Won't you tell me what you were thinking?" he asked. "You seemed—strange. Almost sad. Yet angry and very beautiful."

"I wasn't either angry or sad," she said.

He bent his head and his glance ran over her face, touched the cerise curves of her mouth before lifting to her eyes. "You're a little like this desert just now," he murmured. "Beautiful and challenging. Yet dangerous—and maybe deadly."

Libbie's smoke-black lashes spread apart. "Deadly?" she said, smiling.

"You could be. . . . But I don't think you are."

"Thanks. I—" Her words slowed and stopped. He was bending over her and she knew that he was going to take her into his arms. Knew there was no way she could evade or escape him.

She waited silently, her eyes on his. Then she could see only the line of his jaw and grain of his weather-marked skin. His hands slid up to her shoulders and pulled her into his arms. The steady, strong surging of his pulses was a stirring rhythm, seeking to sweep her own pulses into its beat.

He kissed her, and the same definite rhythm was in his lips.

Libbie told herself that she would not yield or permit him to think she was responding. But the wild pulses were spreading veils of fire over her, muffling her will, dimming even the white sunlight.

His arms tightened, and she had another brief glimpse of his eyes, saw that the black flame was in them. And then the blackness touched her. For part of a second it claimed her, stopping all awareness of herself or of life, halting the world for a fleeting second of non-existence.

He released her slowly. She stepped back, avoiding his glance, waiting again for what might come.

Through the silence, he said: "I'm surprised, too. That is, I—"

Libbie cut in: "It'll be hard traveling after dark. I'm starting right now. Maybe I'll be lucky enough to find a way out of the desert or reach help. But I won't wait another minute. I'll go straight north —or what seems to be north. You can come with me or not."

Keeping her glance carefully from his, she turned and walked steadily, but not too quickly, away from him. A moment later, without glancing back, she knew that Jack McPherson was following her. . .

Libbie was counting slowly and carefully, looking straight ahead so that she would not see the sun dropping toward

the horizon. Twilight would last only a few minutes. Within half an hour after the sun set, night would drop blackly over the desert.

She continued to count. At every tenth footstep, she paused for the space of a long breath. Jack McPherson, beside her, stopped when she did, and he also kept his eyes straight ahead.

Her legs ached and her body had developed hundreds of new, painful muscles. Heat washed up from the sand and down from the sky.

Another pause, another carefully, deeply drawn breath. Jack McPherson spoke for the first time in an hour: "We're sure to get someplace soon—find a prospector's shack or come across a wagon trail that'll lead us out."

"Maybe." Her lilac glance lifted to his face, and she smiled with sudden, sardonic mirth. "Isn't it about time we threw away our nuggets? Even a few pounds of gold can get too heavy in a situation like this."

He grinned and his eyes were clear, silver-gray. "Get rid of yours if it'll help. I'm going to hang onto mine for awhile."

THEY walked again, ploddingly, heat searing their faces. Neither spoke when the sun finally dropped completely below the horizon, but their steps quickened and they moved closer together.

As the sky hazed into twilight, McPherson matched his stride to hers. Later, Libbie remembered that during these minutes her shoulder had occasionally brushed his arm, and the brief contact had held back some of the threatening fear.

There was only a few minutes of light left now. The early night would be black and thick. They did not pause to rest, nor did they talk. Instead they walked with all the speed they could force from their tired legs.

"Listen." McPherson's low word came to her dully. Libbie halted, straining to hear.

She straightened and looked at him with light sparking in her eyes. "Horses," she said. "Riders. I know by the sound that they're carrying riders. We've got to find them!"

"There they are." His hand touched her arm and closed on it. "They'll come out from behind that dune in a few minutes. Come on." He began to run, shouting as he stumbled across the sand.

Libbie drove herself after him. When she glimpsed two horsemen riding out from behind the dune, her piercing cry shattered the stillness.

The riders slowed their ponies. Jack McPherson waved his arms, and they wheeled, starting forward at a gallop. "They've seen us!"

"Yes," Libbie whispered, and both hands went to her thirst-tortured throat. Her eyes stung but she was unaware of her own sudden tears, indifferent to everything but the approaching horsemen.

"Looks like we've made it," McPherson told the girl. "You've been—great, Libbie."

She straightened. "Jack, listen to me! I've got to say this before they get here. Don't mention the gold. Do anything you wish about it later—after you reach Murdock City. But keep still about it now—please!"

He turned sharply. "Why?" He broke off as the first rider reined in beside them.

"Looks like you two've had a bad time," the horseman said and dropped from the saddle. Without waiting for an answer, he untied a water bag, opened it and held it out to Libbie. "Just take a small mouthful at first," he said. "In a few minutes you can drink more."

He was wearing the uniform of a United States army officer. He was big and dark, and the desert land seemed a natural background for him. Sun and wind had tanned his skin to the shade of tree bark, making his light brown eyes seem golden. Libbie liked his grin and what it did to the golden eyes.

She swallowed a little of the water and handed the bag to McPherson. "Thank you. We—"

"Don't thank me," said the officer swiftly. "I'll always be grateful that we happened to ride this way." His voice was darkly rich, holding undertones which were, somehow, as golden as his eyes.

Just then the second rider reached them —a slight, pliantly graceful figure handling her pony with a special ease.

A girl! Shock flashed through Libbie, touched with unreasoning fear. The girl

was Lyama Santillana who lived only a few miles from the Crossed Stick. Lyama and her family had moved into the district from Mexico a year before, but she had remained aloof from everyone in the community. Libbie had met her briefly on several occasions and had been puzzled, even faintly irritated by her.

"Miss Farrell!" she said in a low, almost husky voice. "I'm very glad we come."

"So am I. Perhaps later I'll be able to thank you properly."

But Libbie felt faint shock again as their eyes met. Lyama's eyes were unreadable and obviously guarded, her face unsmiling and still. *Why, she seemes almost angry!* Libbie thought. *As if she resents finding us!*

"You were both lost in the storm?" Lyama asked.

"Not exactly. That is, not until our ponies bolted. And we weren't together. We found each other afoot. Miss Santillana, this is Dr. John McPherson."

The dark girl's eyes stirred suddenly and became deeply, alively black. "I'm glad we've met," she murmured. Stepping from the saddle, she held out her hand.

As McPherson took it, Lyama smiled slowly up at him. Uneasiness edged along Libbie's nerves. An irritating, disturbing uneasiness which forced her to acknowledge the other girl's loveliness. Lyama was alien as lotus fruit, but there was mystery and color about her beauty.

Her black, severely smooth hair showed that her head was that of an aristocrat. Her features were straight and almost arrogant, her flesh warm, dark ivory. Dressed in a short, fringed leather skirt and tunic, and wearing boots ornamented with silver, she suggested an older, more exotic world.

The army officer said to Libbie, "Let me help you up. You and I'll ride on my pony. Lyama and McPherson can take hers. Which reminds me, I'm Fred Crittenden—just in case this is the point where introductions are in order."

Lyama laughed softly. "Sorry. Miss Farrell, may I present Lieutenant Fred Crittenden? The lieutenant comes from Yuma, where he's stationed."

"Where I *was* stationed," Crittenden said. His glance remained on Libbie. "I've been transferred to San Francisco but I'm on leave before reporting there."

"And," Lyama continued, her voice still holding laughter, "this is Dr. McPherson."

Jack McPherson shook hands briefly. "You suggested I ride with Miss Santillana," he said, his tones too crisply decisive. "Is that agreeable to you, ma'am?" he asked, turning to the dark girl.

"Certainly. I'll get up first, then you sit behind me. But please—" the low voice became even huskier— "call me Lyama."

"Ready, ma'am?" Crittenden said. He lifted Libbie into the saddle and climbed up behind her.

Lyama's pony wheeled and led the way across the darkening sand.

"I hope we're going in the right direction," Libbie murmured.

"We are. Leave that to Lyama. I don't believe it'd be possible for her to become lost on the desert. She's part of it. Natural enough, too, since she's half Indian."

"I didn't know that." Libbie's words lifted in surprise. "She came here from Mexico."

"Yes, but the family had lived in this district until moving below the border ten or fifteen years ago. Her father's Spanish and her mother's Apache."

"Maybe that—explains her."

But Libbie knew that it did not. Her glance hurried after the other girl. Jack McPherson, sitting behind Lyama, was holding the pony's reins with his arms around her. And she sat close against him, her body pliantly graceful, her smooth dark head near his shoulder.

CHAPTER THREE

Golden Magic

WHEN Libbie rode into the Crossed Stick yard on Fred Crittenden's horse, Jack McPherson was already helping Lyama down. The house was in darkness but light gleamed from the windows of the little bunkhouse. As Crittenden drew in, Joao, the middle-aged Mexico vaquero who was the only hand

on the spread, hurried out to meet them.

"I have worried much!" he told her excitedly. "First your father goes and does not return. Then you go. The storm came up and—what to do?"

"I'll talk to you later, Joao," Libbie said. "Come to the house after eight." Turning to the others, she said: "It won't take me long to cook supper. Please come in and I'll have it ready in a few minutes."

"No, thank you, Miss Farrell." Lyama was standing very still and straight, staring at her through the thick gloom. "You're too tired and we'll get food at my home. Besides, Fred and I are expected there."

"Then please make it some other time. I'd like a chance to thank you both."

"Joao said your father had left and not returned," Lyama said, ignoring Libbie's words. "Will he be gone very long?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Still, it's not pleasant for you to be here alone." The dark girl's voice did not warm. "Are you sure you'll be safe?"

"Of course. And I'm sure Dad'll be back in a day or so."

"How about letting me accept that invitation to supper?" Jack McPherson broke in. "I could use some food and I'd like a chance to talk."

"Of course."

Fred Crittenden was beside her, reaching for her hand. "I'd like to stay, too," he murmured, "but I can't. Will it be all right if I drop in later? I expect to be around here for a few days."

"Please do." As her hand returned the pressure of his, she wished she could see what the golden depths of his eyes held.

"Thanks." His fingers tightened even more before he released her and turned to help Lyama into her saddle. Then they rode off toward the gates.

Jack McPherson opened the door, and Libbie groped in the entrance hall for the lamp. When it was lit, she led the way into the living room, lighted two big table lamps and said: "Sit down and rest while I start supper."

"No, you're the one who needs to rest."

Libbie paused and heard the soft rush of her own breath. She had not realized that he was so close to her. The awareness of him was too sudden; she had no defense against it. Instead, she remembered how it had been when she was in his arms. The touch of his hands and the rhythmic pulsebeats driving through his flesh, the black flame in his eyes which had created an incredible moment . . . .

"I'd rather not," she said carefully, not looking at him.

"But you're going to." He took her arm and led her across to the couch, made her sit down in it. The surging rhythm in his touch had been even more driving. It had left echoes of pulses in her own flesh—fiery echoes which could become too real.

Drawing a chair close to the couch, he sat down facing her. "Libbie, I want to talk about your father's disappearance. Something's bothering you. What is it?"

"My father's been missing for three days. He may be dead. Isn't that enough?"

"But there's more to it. There's something you're afraid to tell me—probably afraid to tell anyone."

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She shook her head. "You're wrong. I've told you the whole story. The desert may have claimed another victim—" Her voice broke, and tears seeped through her lashes onto her cheeks.

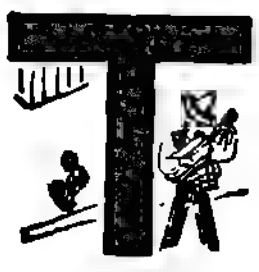
"I'm sorry, Libbie . . . . " He took her hands tightly in his, and then his fingers slid up to her shoulders. His arms closed around her and drew her up to her feet, close to him.

His silver eyes were endlessly deep, and the pupils were turning into black flames. The dark fire touched her, reached claimingly for her senses, and she felt the steady, surging pound of his pulses.

The black flames were spinning blazing veils around her and enclosing her in their darkness. The world and life wavered away from her, were lost to her.

But her own will aroused and caught them back. The veiling darkness disappeared and she freed herself. "This mustn't happen again!"

"Why?" He stood directly before her, as if to bar escape, and looked down at her with the dark flame still in his eyes. "I meant what I said when I first saw you, Libbie. You're beautiful. You're—special. I guess I've been falling in love with you ever since we stumbled on that gold in the gully."



THE gold. She had forgotten it. Their pockets were still filled with nuggets. But he was still remembering . . . .

And there had been blackness in his eyes when he first discovered them. Why had he been on the desert? Why, if he were a physician, would he have come to this sparsely settled range?

"We're strangers," she told him. "We met today for the first time and know nothing about each other. In a few days or a week, we might change our minds. We might not even like each other."

"I won't change my mind," McPherson said, his voice dropping. "And I'll tell you the little there is to know about me right now. When I finished medical college, I applied to the Indian Bureau for a job. They sent me out to Yuma a year and a half ago. This is the first vacation I've had, and I decided to take a look at this part of the desert. Beyond that, I'm healthy, respectable and—"

"If you're in Yuma, why—" But she broke off and said swiftly "Please, I'd rather not discuss it now. Until I know my father is safe . . . . "

His silver-gray glance found her eyes. "I'll organize a searching party," he said. "If I get to Murdock City fast enough, I can round up half a dozen men, file the gold claim and reach the desert by morning."

Libbie's cerise-red lips parted in surprise. "You're really going to claim the gold strike? File on the gully?" she asked.

"Certainly. For both of us. We'll own it jointly. It won't be hard to get out gold, and there's enough there to make us both rich."

When she was silent, he said: "I'd better start for town. "I'll get good men to go back to the desert with me, Libbie. If there's any chance of finding your father, we'll do it."

Still she did not speak. He glanced at her, hesitated and then started toward the door. "Good night. I'll be back. I'll always come back to wherever you are."

She stirred. "Jack, I don't believe half a dozen men can do much about finding my father. Not unless they're very lucky. And it's useless for you to go back to mark out your claim on the desert."

He halted, his sun-bleached brows raised. "Useless? Once I file on the land, I'll have to mark it out. That's required."

"But not this land. Haven't you realized the truth yet? You'll never be able to find that gold again. Someone's always stumbling on gold in the desert. They dash for the government assay office, buy all the equipment they can find and start back. But it's never there. The desert shifts too fast and violently.

"Even without storms, the sand is never still. The breeze is always shaping and reshaping the landscape. If you should accidentally reach the same gully, it may be filled with sand and look no different than any other sand-filled gully. Even if you put in weeks of work, you'd probably find that you'd dug in the wrong spot."

He left the door and came slowly back to her. "Maybe you have a reason for telling me this. Not all large gold deposits can be lost forever, even on a desert. The

location of some of them must remain known."

"Probably—to the Indians. They understand the contours of the desert and its ways. But so far, no white man has ever relocated his strike.

"You knew that when you asked me not to talk about our discovery," he said, his tone flat and empty. "You knew that if I showed Lyama and Crittenden the gully, there'd be a chance of finding it."

Libbie's head tilted. She stood as straight and quiet as he, but warmth gathered in her throat, turned into fire and raced up into her face.

"Now I'm wondering," he went on, "if that isn't what you wanted to conceal from me. Maybe your father knew of a lode out there and went to mark it out. You couldn't be sure that it wasn't the same strike he had stumbled on, and you didn't want it claimed by someone else."

"You're wrong!" The fire was still blazing in her cheeks although her eyes met his levelly. "But I can't explain so that you'll understand."

"If I'm wrong, I'll prove it to myself. I'm going back anyhow." He turned away from her and went out.

* * *

Libbie cooked bacon and eggs and ate them at the kitchen table. She ate because she needed food, even though it was tasteless in her mouth and hurt her nerve-tightened throat. Finally, she drank a cup of coffee and went to her bedroom.

Stripping off her sand-ruined clothes, she bathed, brushed her hair and got into a demure, mist-blue negligee. It was long sleeved, but the bodice moulded every feminine line of her young figure, and the beruffled hem touched the carpet.

She inspected herself in the lamp-lit mirror and saw that the blue of the negligee deepened the color of her eyes. Her hair looked a warmer brown, too, and her mouth even more brilliant than cerise. With Jack McPherson she had been dust-grimed and disheveled. Yet he had said: "I'll always come back to wherever you are."

She left the mirror and walked to the door. She hesitated in the hall, then went into her father's room.

NTERING Oswald Farrell's unused room made the nerves in her throat crawl into a tight, choking knot. She struck a match and lit the oil lamp before moving to a corner desk, where she pulled out the lower drawer.

In the drawer was a box filled with bits of ore and nuggets, similar to those which she and Jack McPherson had discovered in the gully. She looked at them for a long moment. Then, carrying the box with her, she returned to her own room and collected the stones which had been in the pockets of her riding clothes. Dropping them into a bag and with the box from her father's desk still under her arm, she hurried down the hall to the living room.

Pulling a lamp into position on a large, flat-topped table, she poured out the stones from the bag. Beside them, she placed the nuggets from the box.

They were enough alike to have come from the same place. Yet there might be many such deposits of stones hidden by the sand . . . She frowned, and her narrow sable brows lost their smooth curves. Had her father, in spite of his denial to her, started out in search of the gold he had accidentally discovered a few days before and which he had brought home in such hot-eyed excitement?

Then the shot she and Jack McPherson had heard . . . .

She broke the thought off, pushing it away from her.

Jack had said he was a physician with the Indian Bureau in Yuma. Yet Lieutenant Crittenden, who was stationed in Yuma, did not recognize him. Nor did Jack seem to remember the lieutenant who had been on duty there.

A sound came abruptly from the yard. Joao appeared at the door. As he entered, she saw the anxiety on his face.

"There is still no word of *Señor* Farrell?" He made the question a sigh of knowing sound. "And you are well now, after being caught on the desert in the storm?"

"Sit down, Joao. I—"

But there was another sound, another knock at the door now. And this one was quick and demanding.

She turned back and opened it, grate-

ful for Joao's presence at her elbow.

Lyama came in. "Miss Farrell, I was worried about your being here alone. I've been thinking of you all evening, and I decided to ride over and be sure you were all right."

"There's nothing to worry about, but I'm glad you're here. You know Joao?"

Lyama glanced at him and nodded unsmilingly.

He left them, bowing at the door. As he turned to leave, his glance shot toward Lyama and in his eyes was anger. Or angry fear.

"This is a lovely room," the dark girl said, her gaze running over the comfortable chairs, the books, the bright curtains. "You've made the whole house very nice. Not many ranch homes are so attractive."

She halted in the middle of the room, and her face became very still, her body almost tense. She was staring at the table on which Libbie had spread the nuggets. Slowly she moved toward them.

Something flashed across her face and was gone. Then her face settled into stillness and seemed lifeless as that of an idol.

"They're odd—specimens, aren't they?" Libbie said, and going to the table, swept the stones into the box. "We've picked them up on the desert at various times."

Lyama straightened, her eyes stirring with flame. With the same kind of black flame which had been in Jack McPherson's eyes when he discovered the nuggets.

"Yes. Very interesting." Lyama crossed the room again. "If you're sure that being alone doesn't bother you, I won't stay any longer," she added. "Your father's expected tomorrow?"

"He may not get back for several days." Why was she concealing the truth? Why didn't she want the other girl to know Oswald Farrell had disappeared? That he might even have lost his life on the desert?

"Then I'll drop in again. If I can help, please let me. You know how to reach our place, the Broken Bow, three miles south."

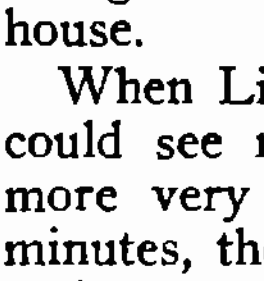
"Thank you. Joao and I'll make out."

Lyama smiled, so briefly that the stillness of her face was undisturbed. "Good night."

She went down the single step from the porch and swung effortlessly into the saddle of her waiting pony. As Libbie closed the door, uneasiness was once more edging along her nerves.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Not-So-Secret Kiss



THE moonless night was unusually warm. Libbie slept in restless snatches, awakening from time to time to confront the thick gloom. Through the dark stirred the shapes of her drowsy fears.

She awoke again, suddenly and violently. A soft rustling came from the front of the house, a faint creak from the living room. She sat up, slowing her breath and listening, until she was capable of sliding her feet from bed to floor. Groping for a robe, she pulled it on, pushed her feet into slippers and took a gun from the dresser.

The click of wood again. A louder creaking. She hurried, her slippered feet soundless, down the hall to the living room. As she entered, there was a scrambling at the window. Then feet struck the ground and ran lightly around the house.

When Libbie reached the window, she could see nothing. The night was once more very still. The stillness held for minutes, then was broken by the echo of racing hoofs. Her hand clamped on the gun, she waited, watching the darkness.

Finally she turned back into the room —only to stop and whirl toward the window once more. That had been a footstep. Light, careful feet were moving along the side of the house. They came on with slow caution, stopped, and she knew that someone was standing so close to the open window it would be possible to reach out and touch him.

"Don't move," she said. "I'm holding a gun on you. Start climbing over the window sill—and be careful. I'll shoot at the first—"

"Libbie!" The low voice was darkly rich. "This is Fred—Fred Crittenden. I was worried about you."

"Fred Crittenden? Worried?" She drew a long, slow breath. "At this hour of the night? It'll be dawn soon!"

"I couldn't sleep, thinking of you here

alone. I had to know you were all right."

Libbie lowered the gun. Someone else had arrived before him and had actually entered the house. She couldn't have mistaken in what she heard.

"May I come in for a minute?" Crittenden asked. "I've frightened you and I'd like to apologize."

"Yes, come in. I'll open the door as soon as I light the lamp."

She felt her way to the big table, held a match to the lamp wick, waited until it flamed steadily before settling the shade over it. The bright glow fell across the table and gleamed on a small, round stone. One of the gold nuggets . . . .

One! She had left them all on the table when she went to bed. She had forgotten to return the box to her father's room. But the box was not here. Only the single nugget remained.

"Libbie," Fred Crittenden called softly from beyond the door. "What's the matter? I've knocked twice."

She let him in, her glance acknowledging him without actually seeing him. Then she returned to the table and the single nugget. There could be no doubt. Whoever she had surprised in the living room had taken the box.

Crittenden came to her side. "Are you all right?" he asked. "Please." He touched her arm, let his hand close gently around it. "I've got to know."

"There was a box on this table. Someone broke into the house just before you came and stole it. It was filled with these." She picked up the stone. "Gold nuggets."

"Gold! You kept it here—on the table?"

She nodded. "I left it here tonight."

"But that must mean you have discovered gold!"

Libbie glanced uneasily toward the open window, then sat down in the nearest chair. "Not exactly," she said. "My father found some of the nuggets. I picked up some others. Desert gold. It means nothing, as you know. Many people have made a strike and rushed to file on it, only to find that it had disappeared. The desert keeps its gold."

"Oh. . . . " He took a chair near her. In the lamplight, his eyes were dark amber. "Then your father was never able to do anything about his find?"

"No. At least, not that I know of, and I'm sure he would've told me."

"And now the nuggets have been stolen."

"They don't matter. Yet it makes me wonder—" She broke off and shaped her lips into a slow smile. "Let's forget it."

I wish I could." Crittenden said. "But now I'll be more worried than ever, realizing you may really be in danger from whoever stole the box of gold."

He leaned toward her. "I'm afraid I'll always worry about you, always want to be around to take care of you."

The amber of his eyes turned into gold and bits of darker gold stirred in their depths. "I haven't been able to stop thinking of you, Libbie . . . . "

He left his chair and bent over her. Libbie became aware of the sheer nightgown under her silk robe, of her loosened hair spilling about her shoulders. "You'll have to stop thinking of me for a while," she said, making her voice light. "Because I'm going back to bed."

But his hands closed on her shoulders, tightened until his fingers dug into her flesh. He pulled her up to feet and looked down into her face. The dark golden flecks in his eyes had turned to blazing light, to white fire.

She stiffened. "You asked to come in and apologize. I've accepted your apology, so please go."

His hands loosened their grip, but only so that he could take her into his arms. His mouth found hers swiftly and roughly. The kiss continued in spite of her angry struggles. As she fought, his arms tightened, pressed her closer and closer against him.

When his lips finally left hers, he murmured: "You know this had to be. We were intended to find each other." And before she could answer, he kissed her again, even more demandingly.

HE WAS very sure of himself. He was a man who was savagedly determined to have what he wanted, whose love was as ruthless as the law of the jungle. Yet there was strength and laughter in him, and the command in his touch was heady. As heady as the taste

of a primitive brew made to ignite reckless fires.

Then, still captive in his arms, she went tense with listening, with suddenly striking fear. There had been a faint movement outside the room, and she knew that they were being watched.

His kiss ended and she freed herself. Darting to the table, she put out the light and ran for the window. But the yard, visible now in the gray of dawn, was empty.

"I thought there was someone here," she said. "I felt as if they were looking into the room."

His eyes darkened, losing all their gold. "Are you sure?"

She hesitated. "The sound was so slight that I could have been mistaken. Perhaps, after what happened, I'm nervous."

"Maybe. But if we were seen—" He broke off. "I should've gone when you asked me to. I'll leave right now."

She went to the door with him and, on impulse, followed him out, deciding to look at the ground near the windows. Crittenden turned back to her.

"Left my pony out on the road so I wouldn't wake you up riding into the yard," he explained. "Good night, Libbie. May I come back?"

"I'm not sure," she began hesitantly.

Before she could finish, he took both her hands, lifted them and pressed them against his lips. "You've got to be sure," he murmured and once more his arms took her, crushed her tightly against him.

He released her abruptly, without attempting to kiss her.

Her glance followed him until he disappeared. There was something hard and savage in him. Yet . . . .

Hoofs stamped the ground near the small corral a few yards away and began to chunk across the yard. A man was leading a saddled pony toward the house. A tall man whose hair glinted even in the gray light.

Jack McPherson! He must have seen Fred Crittenden leave. Must also have seen him take her into his arms as he said good-by. She drew the silk robe even more tightly around her, and tilted her head so that the loose brown hair became a rich veil around her shoulders.

"This is a surprise! Have you been here long?"

"Half a hour. I didn't want to wake you up, so I put my pony in the corral, figuring on going to the bunkshed for awhile. But I was surprised, too. Lights were on in the house and then you came out."

His voice was even and empty. His silver-gray eyes regarded her from a vast distance and with cool, detached interest. Warmth shot over her, filled her throat and lifted into her face. A warmth which made her almost afraid, for it reminded her of the black flames which had been in his eyes when he kissed her.

He said: I came because I've some news for you. We—the men who're out on the desert and I—believe your father's alive."

Libbie's face went white. "You've found trace of him? What? Where?"

"This." He put a hand on the pony's neck. "We found him on the desert last night. He's got a Cross Stick brand—and he's saddled. Not only that, but he was saddled not too long before we found him. He's fresh and in good condition."

Libbie's mist-blue glance clung to McPherson's face. "Which means that Dad wasn't caught in a storm and accidentally hurt. If he had been, the pony would have been wandering all these days, and would be hungry and footsore, his saddle at least partly scraped off."

McPherson nodded. "That's what we figure. But leave the rest of it to us. Stay on this spread. Or at least stay off the desert. We'll find him. If you mix in, you'll just make it tougher."

She hesitated. "All right. I don't agree with you, but I'll wait."

He nodded, his face quiet, his eyes measuring and distant. "Then I'll put his pony back into the corral and get my own horse. You'll hear from us, ma'am."

"Wait, Jack!"

"Yes?" He turned and his glance knifed down at her.

"I—thank you. I'll always be grateful if you find my father."

She put out her hand and he looked down at it, his mouth tightening, before he took it. But as his fingers closed around hers, his face changed and his eyes darkened. "I told you how it was with me,"

he said, his voice harsh. "And I had hopes until I saw you with Crittenden a few minutes ago. Is he the one you love?"

His grip tightened and the steady surging of his pulses beat against her flesh, stirred a rythmn in her blood. His eyes were changing again, the pupils turning into black flames.

Her breath slowed and all of her being paused in waiting. But he released her hand, and straightened. "I'll send word as soon as I can. Good-by, ma'am."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Here I Am"

IBBIE awoke from another night of restless, disturbed sleep and found early sunlight slanting into her room. Still no news of her father. Or of Jack McPherson.

She slid from bed, went to the window and looked out at the yard. Yesterday, Fred Crittenden had sent a note, reiterating his strange apology and stating that he would call today.

"I might as well see him," she thought. "Jack isn't interested. Not after seeing Fred kiss me as if it were his right!"

She turned back into the room, bathed and dressed in riding clothes. As she finished pinning her hair into a smooth, low roll at the nape of her neck, hoofs clopped across the yard and stopped in front of the house.

The thought of her father sent her rushing through the hall to the door. A stranger, obviously a cowhand, was waiting. A second man sat his pony a short distance away.

"Howdy, ma'am," the cowboy said. "I'm looking for Miss Libbie Farrell."

"Yes. What is it?"

"Take it easy now, ma'am. Your father's alive and he wants to see you."

"To see me? Why doesn't he come home?"

"Well, now, he's not in such good shape. Not hurt bad or anything like that, but wore out, kind of. He's in a shack at the edge of the desert and asked us to bring you to him. Says he can't rest until he sees you and knows you're all right."

"You found him? Did he—"

"We'll tell you about it on the way. Get ready as fast as you can. What about a pony? Shall I saddle one?"

"Yes. Yes. Anyone of the three in the corral. I won't be more than five minutes."

She flew back to her room, tied on a neckerchief and pulled a broad-brimmed hat well down over her head. When she reached the door again, her pony was saddled and both riders were waiting.

Away from the ranch, the two men set a fast pace into the desert, where they turned east. There was no chance to ask them just where they had found her father.

They turned again unexpectedly, and half an hour later Libbie saw the edges of the bleak land surrounding the desert. They had not actually crossed the desert but had skirted it.

"Not long now, ma'am," one of them called. He headed for a mound of great, thrusting rocks. Beyond the squat hill was a forest of creosote brush and tangled palo verdes. The men found a path through it. Following, Libbie emerged into a small clearing which contained a weather-beaten shack.

"This is it." The first rider pulled in at the sagging door, helped her down and told his companion: "Look after the horses."

The door swung open as Libbie touched it, and she stepped into a dusky room where two boarded windows held out most of the sunlight. There were two bunks and a chair. Oswald Farrell was sitting in the chair.

"Hello, Libbie, dear. I'm sorry about this."

"Dad!" He looked thin and gray-skinned, his hair whiter than she remembered. He was tied to the chair. Rope bound his arms and legs.

He nodded and indicated something behind her. She whirled and saw not only the man who had brought her but two others. All of them were armed and grinning.

"What—is it?" she asked her father. "What have they done to you?"

"They think I have made a strike. They want me to lead them to it and make sure it's marked so that they can bring in

workmen to take out the gold there."

She sat down on the edge of the bunk. "Didn't you tell them that you could never find the vein you'd discovered?"

He nodded again. "Yes. But I was looking for it when they stopped me. They searched me and found a couple of nuggets."

The man who had brought Libbie to the shack lounged toward them. "Cut out all the pretty words, lady. Your old man knows where his gold is, all right. And if he doesn't turn it over, we're keeping you here, too. Maybe he could stick it out, but you won't be able to. Being a prisoner in this shack may be kind of tough on a girl. A pretty girl, especially. . . ."

His words dropped to a whisper. He whirled toward the door as it opened.

Fred Crittenden entered and paused, trying to adjust his eyes to the gloom.

"Hi," one of the armed men said. "You scared Sam."

But Crittenden had seen Libbie. He started toward her, halted and stared with eyes which were the color of gold. Of hard, glinting metal. Then he turned. "You brought her here! You—"

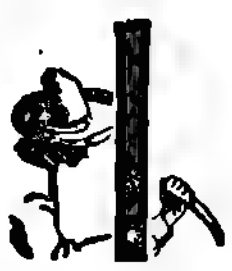
"Sure," Sam said. "We had orders and we followed 'em. Your job is to work on her old man. Get busy."

"You crazy—"

"No, Fred. He's not crazy. Nor am I."

The door had opened once more, although no one had heard its creaking. Lyama stood on the threshold with the light framing her, touching her with the mystery of a pagan idol.

She smiled faintly and lifted her hand. In it was a gun.



'LL explain why we're not crazy, Fred," she said, almost softly. "I was willing to help you get the gold. Oswald Farrell had been seen by many of my people—they *are* my people, more than any other—going to a certain part of the hills. They were sure he had found gold. So I agreed to all your plans when you, too, were told that Farrell had probably made a strike. We'd watch and follow him, force him to talk. We'd use his daughter if necessary."

"Lyama," Crittenden broke in. "You sound as if—"

"I haven't finished. I agreed because you said you loved me and I believed you. I even thought I loved you. But the night I went to the Crossed Stick and took the box of nuggets, I saw you. As I was leaving, I saw you get off your pony and walk into the yard."

"So that's the answer. It was you," Libbie said, speaking her thoughts aloud.

Lyama nodded matter-of-factly. "I followed you back into the yard, Fred, saw you at the window and waited outside after you entered the house. Libbie was kind enough to light the lamps and I could look through the window. I saw some amazing things. You were making love to her. And you meant it, Fred. I knew you meant it as you never had with me."

Her words stopped and the room was briefly silent. Crittenden asked, abruptly and hoarsely: "What are you planning?"

Lyama laughed softly and moved into the room. "Not more than you deserve. First, you'll never again have a chance of finding Indian gold. All the gold on this desert belongs to the Indians, and they could have given it to you if they'd wished. But no Indian would ever turn over his people's treasure to a white man."

"Are you telling me you know the location of gold deposits on this desert?"

"Perhaps. But you'll have to decide that for yourself." The gun in her hand leveled. "Sam, tie him up. Take him outside and tie him to his horse."

"No, you don't! Get back or—"

The three men closed in on him, guns drawn. Slowly, Crittenden's hands lifted. They tied his arms behind his back, stripped the weapon from his thigh and nudged him toward the door. "We'll tie your feet to your bronc."

Lyama's low laugh sounded again. "And then the horse'll be led well into the desert and turned loose."

He was pushed outside, the men close behind him, Lyama moving almost languidly after him. Helplessly, Libbie followed to the door.

But the gunnies had halted and Lyama was suddenly as frozen as if she actually were a stone idol. Facing the open door, guns covering the group before it, were

(Please continue on page 98)

TRAILSIDE COOKBOOK

By Myrtle Juliette Corey

ROCKY MOUNTAIN PUDDING

Scald 1 pint of sweet milk by bringing the milk to boiling point—but not permitting it to actually boil. Beat 2 egg yolks well and add to the milk with ½ cup of rolled cracker crumbs, 2 tablespoons of cocoanut and ½ teaspoon of lemon extract. If you prefer, substitute for the flavoring a teaspoon of grated lemon rind. Bake the mixture 30 minutes in a moderate oven. Beat the 2 egg whites into a stiff meringue; then dribble in 2 tablespoons of honey for sweetening. Spread meringue over the pudding and return to the oven to brown.

CHERRY PUDDING

May be made in the most primitive camp or at home in a modern kitchen, of canned or fresh cherries. Combine 1 tablespoon of melted butter with 2 tablespoons of honey, 1 egg, 1 cup of milk and 2 cups of flour into which have been sifted 2 teaspoons of baking powder. Finally, add 1 cup of cherries, turn into a buttered mold and steam 1 hour. If you haven't a regular mold, use an empty baking powder can, being careful not to fill the can or cans to the top with the pudding mixture.

The pudding may be served with milk and a little sugar if it isn't sweet enough for your taste, a sweet sauce or with Crimson Sauce, which most folks think especially tasty. To make the Crimson Sauce, 2 tablespoons of hot water to ½ cup of currant, cherry, raspberry or strawberry jam or jelly. When blended, add ½ teaspoon of lemon juice and ⅛ teaspoon of sauce. This goes well with any light steamed pudding.

NO CUDDLIN' FOR A SIREN

By Isabel Stewart Way

NIGHT had swept down on the rangeland, and under the soft luster of a full moon, the desert drowsed. But the small border town of Cerritos did not sleep. All along Main street lights glowed and flags fluttered. Rollicking music blustered from saloons and dance halls. Cowboys and cowgirls, jaunty in satin shirts and dress sombreros, strutted the board walk, and jovial "howdys" and hubbub prevailed everywhere. It was fiesta time in Cerritos.

It was pretty magnificent, this border fiesta. Rosita Mallory, dancer at the Crystal Palace, stood in the window nook and watched it all from eager, excited eyes. She loved fiestas. She had long looked forward to this one—especially because Neil Redding would ride in to Cerritos, and to her.

Rosita's heart quickened, thinking of that. A merry, handsome one was Neil, with auburn hair curling crisply to his fine head, and warm hazel eyes filled with teasing laughter. His spirit was gay and adventurous, like Rosita's own. She had known that from the first time she saw him.

Neil hadn't realized it. Rosita frowned a little, remembering that. Neil hadn't noticed her that first evening, not even when she danced. Oh, he'd given her a glance or two, but right away he went back to his low, eager talk with the men.

Rosita hadn't liked that. She wasn't used to it. Since she was a tiny thing, flashing those amazing violet eyes from under long curling lashes had brought every male she knew to his knees before her.

"All men love Rosita," her father, big Pat Mallory would chuckle. "She's got the Irish come-hither on top o' the flirtatious ways she gets from her Mexican mother. She'll never have trouble gettin' what she wants. No more than you did, Carmelita."

"She better hunt for somethin beeger," Rosita's dusky-eyed mother would retort with a smile.

Rosita would laugh and toss her dark head. "What more could I hunt for, Mama?" she'd ask pertly. "You have a fine husband and a whole house-full of *muchachos.*" For, after Rosita, there had been seven little brothers.

"Maybe you not have the luck I did," her mother would reply, with a long look at big Pat from under lashes as long and thick as Rosita's own.

Luck? Rosita sighed. Getting's attention hasn't been as easy as her father had thought.

For Neil fought against her, fought against noticing her charms, and the more he fought, the harder Rosita worked. Even when she discovered there was another girl in Neil's life—pretty blonde Carol Thane—Rosita didn't accept failure. She couldn't, not Rosita.

At first, she told herself that she fought to attract Neil's interest because his aloofness was a challenge. But, as the evenings wore on, with Neil coming to the Crystal Palace again and again, then Rosita knew it was more than that. She knew that if

Roguish Rosita set out to make the fiesta an evening that handsome Neil's blonde fiancee would never forget.

"Neil," she said softly, "I've lived for this night. . . ."

Neil never loved her, she would carry a little grave of all her dreams, always, in her heart.

Then, at last, she had succeeded. There had come the night when Neil caught her arm, almost roughly. "Let's go for a walk," he said, and drew her out into the moonlight. When they came to the weeping willow trees that trailed their branches in Oro creek, Neil caught her in his arms suddenly.

"You little devil," he breathed. "You're an imp—but so lovely. Too damned lovely!" Then his lips fell upon hers for a long moment, a moment when the night was filled with magic far beyond the silver witchery of the moon, a moment when the breeze and the willows and the creek all sang a song that was not of this world.

Then, abruptly, Neil released her, looked down at her, his face all tight. "I had no right to do that, Rosita," he jerked out. "I didn't even want to."

"Why, Neil?" she whispered. "Why?"

"You know why, Rosita. You know there's Carol Thane. She and I are promised. I think—well, I think she plans the wedding for this fall."

Rosita threw back her dark head. "And you'd marry her?" she choked out. "Marry her, when you don't love her? When I'm the girl you love? Neil, that ees crazy. Loco."

Neil's mouth tightened, but his eyes looked stricken. "It isn't crazy, Rosita. It—it's a good marriage. And I do love Carol, in a way. And she'll keep me steady. I need somebody to keep me steady. My father was just a saddle-tramp, wandering wherever he would. He came onto the Lazy Half-Moon with no more than a saddle and a tired horse. My grandfather gave him a job. He married my mother—and Granddad never forgave them."

"But they were happy—your mama and papa?" Rosita asked softly.

"I can remember them together, and I guess they were pretty happy. But it probably wouldn't have lasted if they had lived—they both went in a gully-washer when I was ten. And Granddad raised me."

"And because you were like your papa," Rosita guessed shrewdly, "your grandpapa tried to change you. Always he say you must be steady like him. And I bet he was not happy, that old one. I bet he have the long face and talk like a cross dog barking."

Neil threw back his head and laughed. "That's Granddad!" he exclaimed. Sobering, he added, "But a man doesn't live just to be gay, Rosita. He has work to do—and the gay ones are not apt to be the workers."

Rosita remained uneasily silent. Maybe he was right about that. Her father, big Pat, was a gay-hearted *hombre,* and he certainly wasn't a hard worker not unless it suited his mood. Of course, the land of their *ranchita* was poor. But all the same, Mama and the *muchachos* might not be hungry quite so often if Papa worked harder.

Her heart-shaped face was wise as she looked up at Neil. "But the workers who have much, are they always the happy ones, Neil? And for the chance to work, you would forget me? I won't ask for much. Only that you love me, always."

Neil's arms had tightened about her again. He said, huskily, "I didn't want to hurt you, Rosita. That's why I tried not to fall for you. But you've got to understand, darling. I've got to make you understand."

"Then you'll come to me again?" she whispered, her arms going about his neck. "You'll take much time to make me understand?"

Neil stared down, then he grinned. "I'll come back fiesta night. I guess we're entitled to a little time to get our lives straightened out. I guess—" He drew a long breath, then he didn't talk any more. He just bent his head and demandingly and fiercely kissed her again.

Tonight he was coming back.

THE rattle of wheels and clop of horses' hooves brought Rosita back to reality. She glanced back to the platform where the marimba orchestra played. It was time for her first dance, but she hesitated only a moment. Then, with the ruffles of her red dress fluttering around her slender ankles, she ran toward the door.

A hard hand fell upon her arm. She looked up at Bert Slade, who owned the

Crystal Palace and paid her good money as an entertainer. Slade was tall and lean, and he bore the marks of many years of hard living. He looked at her from chill gray eyes. "That's your dance, ain't it?" He jerked his thumb toward the orchestra.

"*Si, si,* but the stage is come in, *Señor,* and I want to talk to Juan. He will bring news from Mexico of my family."

Slade's thin lips tightened. "Can't you pull loose from your family?" he demanded harshly. "Sometimes I wonder why I ever took you out of your mud puddles and adobe hut and brought you here."

An instant's anger flashed in Rosita's violet eyes, then she laughed impishly. "But the customers are pleased with Rosita, no?"

Slade stared, then shrugged. "I want to talk to you. Come into my office when you have a chance."

She nodded and he moved away from her. Rosita hurried on outside, walked swiftly down the boardwalk toward the stage that had just drawn up. Tears of homesickness welled in her dark eyes and she quickened her steps—to bump into a tall yellow-haired girl in a bright blue satin shirt.

"Oh, excuse, please!" Rosita mumbled. Then she stopped—for the girl was Carol Thane. Rosita's heart sickened. If Carol had come with Neil, it meant that Neil didn't want those moments together.

Carol Thane spoke, in tones as cool as her gray eyes. "Yes, Neil's in town. That's what you want to know, isn't it? He brought me in for the dance tonight. Too bad you'll be busy at the Crystal Palace and can't come and watch the dance!"

Rosita smiled up at the taller girl. "Eet ees also too bad," she said sweetly, relapsing into the expressions her mother used when talking the new tongue, "that a girl like you cannot reesk her reputation by following her man eento a place like the Crystal Palace, when he tires of her so-great charms and slips away for a drink."

Still smiling, noting with satisfaction the angry flush on Carol's face, Rosita pushed by her and up to the middle-aged stage-driver who was helping out the last of the passengers.

Juan Alvarez lived in her native town. Always she had known Juan—he was, in fact, a distant relative—and now it was like seeing one of her family. "Juan, did you see them—Papa and Mama and the *ninos*?" she asked when he was free.

He looked down at her and smiled from grave dark eyes. "*Si, lindita,*" he answered in the soft Spanish tongue. "They are well. And there is a new *nina* since last Saturday. As always, Mama wants you to come home. And, as always, Mama is right, *chula.* This is no place for you."

"From here I can send money," she pointed out slowly for, as always, thoughts of home brought a great yearning.

Juan's face went graver. "Si, and they have need of the money now. Your papa, he did not want to tell you, but Mama say you should know. The *ranchita*—if Papa cannot pay the rest of the money by next month, then they lose it. Five hundred dollars it would be, in thees *Americano* money. And so much you cannot get, *chulita.*"

"Five hundred dollars!" she echoed, her throat tightening. "No, how could I? But if Papa has not the money—"

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"Your papa does not worry. He weel find some way, he says."

Rosita nodded, turned away. Papa wouldn't worry, of course. He would laugh, and if the family must leave the *ranchita*, then Papa would lead them gaily. "Si. Thanks, Juan."

She sighed, started slowly back for the Crystal Palace. Then, suddenly, she stopped. For, just ahead, Neil Redding was alighting from his horse. Carol Thane stood on the sidewalk, waiting for him.

They came down the sidewalk, straight toward Rosita, and she wished the earth would open under her feet.

Carol looked at her, a triumphant gleam in her cool gray eyes, and Rosita knew, all at once, that Carol had brought Neil just so they would meet. There was a sudden grayness to Neil's face, a tightening of his wide mouth as he looked at Rosita.

Carol spoke first. "And is this the little dancer you told me about, Neil? She *is* sort of cute!" Her voice was as impersonal as if she were talking about a horse, or a puppy.

Neil's cheeks reddened, but Rosita flung back her dark head. "And is this the girl you talked about, *Señor* Neil?" she asked pertly. "She is, indeed, sort of—" She let her voice trail off, while her violet eyes went over Carol mockingly, from her yellow head down to her riding boots. Carol's face reddened with anger.

"Rosita!" Neil exclaimed sharply. "You're being rude."

ROSITA'S head stayed high, though she had to fight back sudden hot tears. "*Señor*," she said, speaking only to him, "once I knew a yellow-haired woman who came to our small pueblo to live. She would find young birds and feed them from her hand and make them tame. Then, when they wished to use their wings, she clipped them, so always they had to stay around her door-yard, close at hand.

"And because their wings were clipped, they could not live the life they were meant to live, and always they were dependent on her. It was a good thing, I think, when the old cat would finally catch them because they had not the spirit left to fly away!"

Neil stared at her, frowning, his cheeks reddening more. Carol stared from one to the other suspiciously.

Rosita started to go on, but Neil caught her arm. "I think you owe Miss Thane an apology!" he said firmly.

Rosita looked up into his eyes that were now so hostile. This was Neil, who had held her in his arms and promised to come to her again this night—but not with another girl.

Rosita's fury was too big for her to hold. Her hand came up and she slapped him, so hard that her palm stung with it. "Take that, *Señor* Clipped-wing!" she panted out.

She whirled and ran into the Crystal Palace. Pushing through the crowd, she made her way toward the stage. The orchestra, seeing her, started the gay strains of her dance, and Rosita ran up the steps.

The next minute she was whirling, dipping, swaying to the music's rhythm. It was only Rosita's body that danced, only her lips that smiled. Rosita's thoughts were all with Neil and the yellow-haired girl. For the first time in her life, it brought no joy when the wild applause came at the end. She only smiled mechanically, then ran off. She wanted to be alone.

A hand caught her arm. Slade stood outside his office, waiting. "Come on. Remember, I said I wanted to see you." He drew her into the room and shut the door.

He sat down behind his massive desk, watched her from shrewd narrowed eyes. Finally he said, "Something's upset you. And I take it that it's Neil Redding. I was watching from the doorway when he and that Carol Thane give you the go-by out there."

She drew a long furious breath. "I hate him."

"Well, I'm mighty glad. I've got a job for you that's going to put a crimp in his hoity-toityness."

She frowned. "What kind of a job? You hired me to dance."

"Exactly. But you can do outside work and make some extra money. A lot of extra money."

She gasped. She thought of her family's

needs. Putting her hands on the table, she leaned forward. "Would it be as much as —five hundred dollars?"

He looked at her a moment, then nodded. "Seven hundred and fifty dollars, if you work fast. Neil Redding has just come into the rest of his inheritance from his granddad's estate. He and that Carol Thane came in this afternoon to sign for the cash and get it.

"I happen to know that Neil has seven thousand dollars in my safe. That's probably why the Thane girl wouldn't let him out of her sight," he added. "She's had her eye on the Lazy Half-Moon Ranch and the money these past years."

"But what of me?" Rosita asked.

"Get Neil to play in the card game tonight—I'll do the rest. Tomorrow morning I'll give you the seven-fifty, in time to send what you want to your folks."

She gasped again. "You know about that?"

"I make it my business to know everything," he told her. "How about it, Rosita? You can fix things for your folks, and make that other girl squirm, at the same time. In fact," he added with a dry laugh, "I'm not sure that she'll want Neil, without his money."

Rosita stood very still. The chance to help her folks—that was wonderful. But the chance to make Neil pay, and to take away what Carol wanted—that was perfect. "*Si,* I do it," Rosita said quickly.

"Of course," Slade agreed. "You can make any man fall for you, if you half try."

Half try! Never would she try harder, Rosita resolved, as she stopped in her dressing room to brush the heavy dark hair and put a fresh flower in its shining waves. Grabbing up a black lace shawl that had been her grandmother's, she hurried outside, down to where the fiesta dance had already begun.

AN ORCHESTRA had been brought out from the city and it played on a platform, while the gaily dressed crowd danced or watched. Neil and Carol were dancing together, with Carol laughing up into his face, whispering things.

Rosita's hands clenched to fists as she stood there. Then, seeing Juan Alvarez watching, she worked her way over to him. "Juan, ask the *musicos* to play the *bandito,*" she whispered. "Then dance with me, Juan—close to Neil Redding and his partner. I want to dance with him next. Please, Juan. It means that I can send the money home to Mama when you return tomorrow."

Juan frowned at her, then nodded, walked over to the musicians. Coming back, he caught her in his arms when the next lively burst of music came. And, as Rosita asked, they were dancing close to Carol Thane when the first call of "Bandito!" came.

At the call, every man dropped his partner, grabbed the nearest girl and swung her into the dance while the music started again. Rosita slipped into Neil's arms as he dropped Carol and turned. Juan caught Carol and, Rosita noted with satisfaction, was swinging her as far away as he could.

Rosita was in Neil's arms again, her whole being thrilled by his nearness. She looked up, met his gaze, and her voice came out huskily. "Neil, I could not help it—talking so tonight. For my heart, it was curling up and dying—"

"Rosita, I tried to make you see it was not right. You and I—we'd be like two wild things. We'd probably even fight each other."

"But we would love each other, always, Neil," she whispered. "I could not clip your wings, ever—but life would be very sweet." She looked up from under those long lashes. "Would it not, Neil *mio*?"

A moment longer he stared, then he said hoarsely, "Yes, it would be sweet. But—"

"Let's get away from here," she flashed. "The man will call *Bandita* again and I cannot lose you so soon." She caught his hand and they slipped away.

Outside, under the moonlight, Neil looked down at her, his face drawn with bewilderment. At last he burst out, "Rosita, why do you make it so hard for us both? Can't you see this does no good?"

"You promised to come back, Neil," she reminded him softly. "And then—you brought her."

"She wanted to come," he said, "and why shouldn't I bring her? I'm going to

marry her. We can't change that. I can't hurt her."

Rosita drew a long breath of rising anger. He couldn't hurt Carol, but he could tear her own heart to bits, and not mind it. She wanted to lash out at him, to claw and scream at him. But she had to fight back her anger if she were to make Neil play in the only way she could—Slade's way.

She flung herself suddenly against Neil, buried her head on his shoulder. "I guess you are right, Neil," she said softly. "But for a little hour. Neil, I've lived for this night."

Neil's arms slipped down around her, drew her tightly against him. "I owe that to you, Rosita—and to myself!" Then his lips were upon hers.

It was hard for a little time after that to remember anything else. She didn't want to think of anything else—not with Neil's arms holding her so tightly. But a fresh burst of music drew her gaze past Neil and through the window to the dance-floor.

She saw Carol pushing toward the door, her face angry under the yellow hair. She would be out here in a moment and find them.

Rosita lifted her head. "Neil, come just once more to the Crystal Palace and watch me dance."

Neil rubbed a hand over his face. "But Carol—"

Rosita laughed. "She is dancing with somebody else. She'll never miss you."

Neil went. He was like a man bewitched. As they walked through the moonlight, a thousand flames seemed kindled in Rosita's veins, and she knew that Neil felt the same. His hand, grasping hers, told her that.

It was easy, after that. Once inside the Crystal Palace, it was easy to walk up to the table, start Neil playing at one of the tables, just by suggesting it. Rosita knew a moment of remorse when she saw Neil cast down a gold piece to buy chips.

She almost choked out, "No, Neil, don't!" But just in time she remembered Carol. . . . Anyway, there was Papa and Mama and the little ones, needing the money she could send them tomorrow.

Slade spoke low from beside her. "We'll let him win for a time. Then, when he's been softened, we'll tighten up. Your seven-fifty is as good as in your pocket, Rosita."

She nodded and stood there mutely, watching Neil win, watching his excitement mount. She saw, too, the drinks that Slade brought, which Neil drank almost mechanically as his interest in the game deepened. When the game moved to an upstairs private room, Rosita followed.

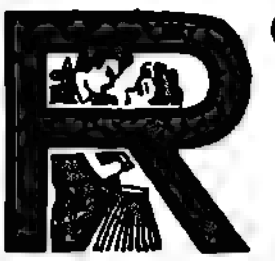
Slade was beside her again. "Had one of the boys posted out there to say no female can come into the Palace without a escort, and that yellow-haired gal went back to dig up one. But nothing can stop the plucking now."

No, nothing could keep Neil from losing all he had now. His money. Perhaps even his ranch. Yes, and his girl. Maybe he did love Carol Thane. Even though Carol wasn't the right one for him—

Rosita stopped, her violet eyes widening. How did she know Carol wasn't the right one for him? Maybe Neil needed somebody to clip the wings of his gay spirit. Maybe the way he was throwing everything away tonight proved that. Certainly, Carol wouldn't do to Neil what she—Rosita herself—was doing. Maybe Carol loved him too much to do that!

A little moan escaped Rosita's lips as she stared after Neil, who was already going up the stairs. "No," she whispered. "No, Neil." She couldn't go through with it, not even for her folks.

But how could she stop Neil? Slade wouldn't let her tell him. Slade had kept his eyes on her all through the game and now she knew why. He'd been afraid she would weaken. He might not even let her inside the room when they got upstairs.



ROSITA looked around; met the drunken gaze of a swaggering rowdy. Her eyes narrowed, ever so slightly. Then one fringed lid drooped in a wink. It worked. The rowdy reached out a big hand and caught her.

"Well, hello, sweetheart," he exclaimed. "How about a kiss?"

Rosita knew if she stamped on the man's insteps, and kicked her sharp toes into his shins, he would loosen his hold, but she did none of those things.

She merely screamed, "Neil, Neil!"

Almost instantly, Neil had whirled and then his fist shot out. It smacked against the man's bulbous nose, then again at the point of the chin. The rowdy slipped to the footrail of the bar and lay there, smiling in silly fashion, but not moving.

"Are you all right, darlin'?" Neil asked.

Rosita swayed limply into his arms. "Take me outside, Neil," she begged.

Slade's voice spoke sharply, but Neil paid no heed. Catching Rosita up in his arms, he pushed his way through the crowd and carried her outside.

He put her down, but his arms stayed around her. "Rosita darlin', when I saw that man holding you—"

He bent his head and started to kiss her, but Rosita drew back.

"No, Neil. First you must listen. I purposely brought you into the Crystal Palace so you could lose all your money. Slade let you win for a while, and gave you a lot of drinks, and then he was going to take it all."

He looked into her eyes, his face very tight, very grave. "Why, Rosita?"

"Because—because my folks are about to lose the *ranchito,* down in Mexico. They need five hundred dollars, and Slade would've given me that much if you played." She caught her breath, went on:

"No, Neil. That is not the truth—not all of it. I did such a wicked thing because—because I love you so. Because I thought that she—the yellow-haired one—would suffer, too, if you lost your money. And I hated her. And now—" her voice broke on a sob— "now you will hate me, too, Neil."

Then Rosita saw the shadow of Carol Thane standing before them.

"So here you are," the girl burst out. "I made my way inside that—that dance hall—just in time to see you carrying this—this honkatonk girl out the side door."

"Stop that, Carol," Neil said sharply.

"I won't!" Carol's gray eyes blazed. "I'll say all I want about a cheap little dance-hall girl. And another thing—is it true that you've been gambling?"

"Yes, I've been gambling, Carol." Neil's voice sounded strangely dead. "Why?"

"Why?" she echoed furiously. "Because everybody knows that Slade runs a crooked game—when the stakes are big enough! And Neil Redding, if you've gambled away that money—"

"If I have, Carol?" Neil prompted.

"Then I'm through!" Carol said furiously. "Do you think I'll take a chance on marriage with you, Neil Redding, without the security of the ranch?"

Then Carol she stopped, looked at him closely. "Or maybe you didn't lose, Neil?"

Neil laughed. "That makes no difference, Carol. As far as you and I are concerned, we're through. My marriage has to have a greater security than land or cattle or money. It has to have understanding—and love."

Carol stared, then turned and hurried away wrathfully. But Rosita didn't take time to watch her. She couldn't, for Neil had caught her in his arms again, and was whispering plans for a quick marriage, a honeymoon to Mexico to save the *ranchito.* Then even he stopped talking—and began kissing her. . . .

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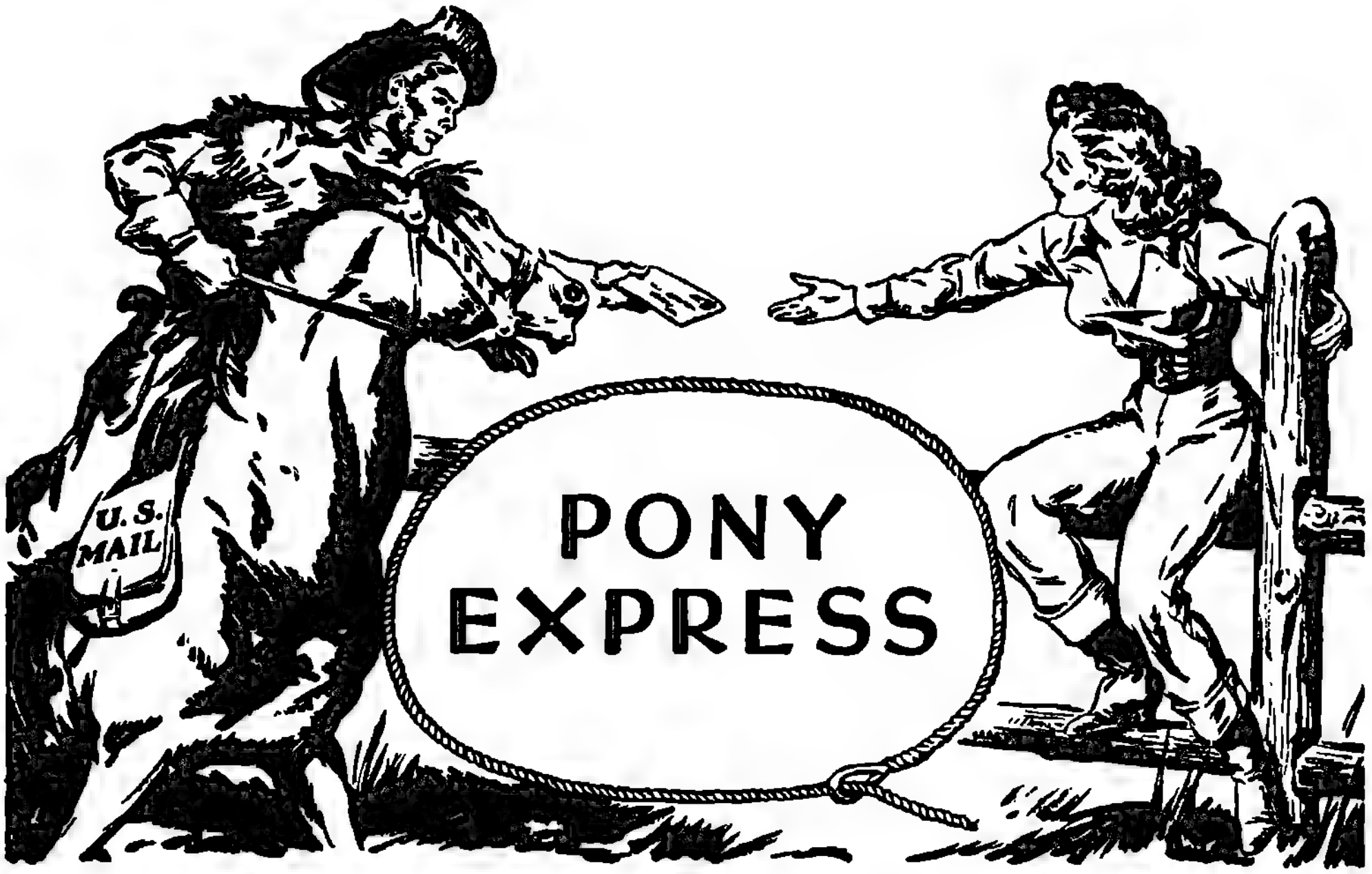


PONY EXPRESS

Every lonely RANGELAND ROMANCES reader can get acquainted with our lively pen pals all over the world.

Parisian Charmer

Dear Editor:

I'm a French girl—from Paris—and I'm itching for cowboy pen pals.

I'm a 21-year-old girl with chestnut hair and brown eyes. I like horseback riding, and cowboy songs very much. Please write me and tell me all about the Far West.

JANE TUR
c/o Dr. Roos
Woodlands Farm
Ridgefield, Conn.

Leap Year Dare

Dear Editor:

I'm sure hoping you'll let my letter get into the Pony Express mailbags.

RANGELAND ROMANCES is a mighty fine magazine. I enjoy reading it very much. The stories are wonderful—but that's just the trouble; they're *too* good!

In most every story a handsome cowboy meets a beautiful girl—and usually before he knows her name, he's pulling her into his arms (without seeming too bold) and kissing her as she's never been kissed before. And he makes her *like* it—which is usually the start of a very beautiful romance.

I'd like to meet a cowboy like that sometime. Don't reckon there are any though. None of the cowboys I ever met up with were. They're either too bashful or too much the other way.

I'm certainly not one of those beautiful girls, but I'm not too hard to look at either; lots of folks think I'm nice lookin'. Besides, I'm a yodelin' cowgirl.

Well, if any of you cowpokes feel like sticking up for yourselves, here's your chance to do it!

But be *careful*. This year is leap year, you know.

GWEN WALDNER
P.O. Box 751
Huron, S. Dak.

Down-at-the-Heart Paratroopers

Dear Editor:

This is our first attempt to lasso ourselves a little space in the Pony Express. We hope that upon making our hitches we'll find many a pen pal from everywhere on the planet Earth.

We're two paratroopers, stationed at "Isle of Forgotten Men"—Fort Bragg, North Carolina, as it is known to the public at large. Believe us, it gets plenty lonesome here!

Some vital statistics: Roel is 22 years old, blond, 5 ft. 9 in. tall, and weighs 155 lbs. All his pals call him Roy. Walter is 20 years old, a redhead and Irish. He's 6 ft. tall and weighs 170 lbs. What do you suppose his nickname could be? "Rusty" to one and all.

Roy hails from Louisiana and Rusty from Georgia. We have no outstanding abilities or traits of character, but we do like to write. That, boys and girls everywhere, is your cue for immediate action.

We have various types of snapshots, from the usual still snaps to some taken while we were

descending to the ground via parachute, and we're willing to exchange for others as long as they last. You may betcha life we'll be waiting for loads of letters, so please don't disappoint us.

SGT. ROEL R. LeBLEU #38656051
and
SGT. WALTER H. PIERCE #44180739
Service Co., 505th Abn. Inf. Regt.
82nd Airborne Division
Fort Bragg, N. Car.

Well-Spanked Helen

Dear Editor:

How about letting a gal from Michigan get a few pen pals? I'm 17, have blue eyes and reddish-blonde hair, stand 5 ft. 2 in. tall, and I weigh 110 lbs. I like writing letters, dancing, sailing and generally having fun.

But I'll bet not another girl my age has my problem. Whenever I misbehave or don't obey, Daddy still takes me 'cross his knees and gives me an old-fashioned spanking with the hairbrush! I'd like to compare notes with any other girl who gets spanked, if any do. I'll write to anyone who wants to correspond with a well spanked 17-year-old miss.

HELEN PENDLETON
Box 19
Lincoln Park, Mich.

Chirping Charleen

Dear Editor:

Here comes a letter right out of the dust of the West, askin' permission to catch a ride on the Pony Express. I'm sure a hopin' I make a go of it 'cause I'm terrible desperate for pen pals.

I live in the western part of Montana, 28 and 36 miles from nobody. I'm 14 years old, about 5 ft. 3 in. tall. I've got reddish-brown hair and greenish-blue eyes. I love all sports, but my favorites are horseback riding, ice skating, dancing and listening to Western music and singers. I can play the Spanish guitar and want to learn to play the Hawaiian guitar.

I'll be campin' at the post office until I get a letter from you cowgirls and cowboys, so many I'll have to call for a buckboard to pack me and my letters home.

CHARLEEN WILHELM
Proctor,
Mont.

North Pole Airman

Dear Editor:

I also want to try to crash the pen pal page. This is my second attempt.

I'm a guy in the US Air Force, stationed at Goose Bay, Labrador, near the Artic Circle. Six feet tall, I have brown hair, brown eyes, and I'm 19 years old. My home is in the good old state of Colorado; my nickname—Dan.

It gets mighty lonesome up here, and I could do with a lot of letters, especially from girls my own age in California and Florida. I expect to be stationed at one or the other when I leave here in November of 1948, and I would like to know a few people from there. But I still would like letters from all over the world. I promise to answer all mail, and exchange snapshots.

PFC. DUANE A. NELSON #17219708
135th AACS SQ
APO 677
c/o Postmaster, New York, N. Y.

Marvella in a Nutshell

Dear Editor:

I'm a blue-eyed blonde of 15 years of age. I weigh about 115 lbs. stand 5½ feet tall, and am not bad for sore eyes.

I live on a farm of cotton, like to go to the movies—and would like to have a picture of some of your guys and gals. What do you say?

MARVELLA GRIGGS
Rt. #1
Lake City, Ark.

Two Blue-Eyed Pals

Dear Editor:

We are two young, attractive, not especially good-looking girls, desiring pen pals from any and all parts of the world.

Helen works and I go to school, so we have plenty of time in which to answer your letters. Helen is 24, with brown hair, blue eyes, she's 5 ft. 2 in. tall and weighs 115 lbs. I'm 17 years old, have brown hair and light blue eyes, stand 5 ft. 4 in. tall, and weigh 128 lbs.

We both like to dance—round and square, skate, swim and play cards. I also like to ride horses, but Helen doesn't care for that.

HELEN (SHERRY) BOWMAN
1331 South Fulton
and
D'ARLINE JONES
2108 No. Atlantic Pl.
Tulsa 6, Okla.

Chit-Chat from a Chit

Dear Editor:

I hope I'm not the only 13-year-old girl who has written for pen pals. I love to write letters as well as receive them.

I'm in the eighth grade at school. I weigh 116 lbs., but I don't know how tall I am. My hair is long and brown, and I have deep brown eyes. I love the smell of the country air. I like horses, and the smell of stables and hay—so I guess I'm just a country girl.

Although I was born in Los Angeles, I've been brought up in Victorville. I've always wanted to live on a farm. My ambition is to be a nurse; my hobby is collecting movie stars' pictures, and going to shows. I'm always looking for new friends. I like to eat most anything, and enjoy every sort of sport.

There's more to tell—but I guess it's time to wait for mail. I'll be more than glad to exchange pictures with anybody.

HELEN JOYCE LOMILE
Box 318
Victorville, Calif.

Adios, amigos, until next month.

When Kitty impetuously hired the redheaded saddle-tramp, she forgot you can't hang on forever to a—

STORE-BOUGHTEN BRIDEGROOM

KITTY hated the stranger who came riding out of the clump of cottonwoods and cut across to head off Silver. Sure, Silver was running away. But let him! It was what Kitty wanted: to go faster and faster, feeling the wind whip against her hot cheeks, drying her angry tears. It was all part of the savage mood that held her.

But the tall, redheaded stranger cut across and headed off the gray stallion, and although Kitty yelled at him to leave them alone, he reached out and caught Silver's bridle. There was a moment of struggle; then Silver stopped, panting and trembling. The rider grinned at Kitty, blue eyes shining in a freckled face, as if he expected her to gush forth with gratitude for his noble act.

Kitty didn't. She merely jerked her hat straight on the jet hair that had slipped loose to become a shining shawl about her shoulders, and glared at him.

"You nosy saddle-bum!" she said. "What right have you got to interfere in my business? Get out of my way!" She lifted her quirt, ready to bring it down on the stallion's flank, but the man reached out and caught her arm.

Then he was out of the saddle, still holding to Silver's bridle, and looking at her from a face gone suddenly grim. His wide mouth was a straight line above his square chin. "If you crave to kill yourself in the gully just ahead, go to it. But this horse—he's a fine animal, and I don't like to see good horseflesh wasted."

"It's none of your business what I do with my horse," she blazed. "Leave me alone!"

The redhead didn't answer. Instead, he put an arm about her waist, jerked her off the saddle and set her down—hard. Then he grabbed some grass and began rubbing down the lathered horse, talking all the time in soothing tones, quieting the animal down.

Kitty stood, watching him from stormy gray eyes. She was still furious—and a little ashamed, too, of what she had done to Silver. But more than anything, she wanted to lash out at the redhead who had dared be so arrogant, so high-handed with her—Kitty Lane.

"If you'll let me have my horse," she began, "I'll—" She couldn't go on. Suddenly all the horrible things that had happened today were back upon her. Crazily, she found herself trembling, and the angry tears came again.

She must have sobbed, for the stranger turned and stared at her. Then, ground-hitching Silver, he strode over and put his hands upon Kitty's arms.

This disarmed Kitty still more. "I—I don't go around abusing horses," she choked out. "I love Silver, but he—he wanted to run, and I wanted to run, too, so—" Again she had to stop.

"You were runnin' away from somethin'?" he asked softly. He pushed her head against his shoulder and let his arms slip around her, quite as if he had known her always. "It doesn't do any good, sugar," he told her. "It's better to stay and face things. . . . Can you tell me about it?"

She had thought that she could never talk about it to another living soul, but now she found the words spilling out. "I've been engaged—ever since I was a kid—to Roy Oliver. We were g-going to

By Ruby la Verte Thomson

Dan bent his head. "I've got to practice up on this love business..."

g-get married!" The tears came again, and she had to scrub at her cheeks before she could go on. "He wanted w-work in town because he d-doesn't like ranches, so I went to Denver to see about selling my ranch. I was gone three weeks and w-when I got home today—"

"What happened?" he asked.

"There's a party tomorrow night," she told him fiercely. "At the Sibley's cabin up at Lost Lake. Everyone's invited, and everyone knows that it's to—to announce Ruth Sibley's engagement to Roy!"

"But I thought he was engaged to you."

"He was! But Ruth Sibley's always wanted him, and while I was away—she got him. She gets everything, because her dad's the banker. He's giving Roy a job, the kind of job Roy wants. And I've got to go to the party and have everybody stare and laugh and talk about me being jilted."

"Why go?" he asked.

Her head jerked up. "Not go—and let them think I'm broken-hearted? I'd rather die! I'm going all right, and I'm going to fix Roy. He's going to be so sorry!"

THE redhead said: "Now, let me get this straight. The guy was engaged to you, and without breakin' his engagement, he tied himself up to another girl whom he's now going to marry."

"Well, he did write me," she admitted. "He said that maybe we weren't meant for each other since I liked ranch life and he didn't. I said maybe he was right about it and that I'd consider it—thinking it would be good for him to stew a while. But I put the ranch up for sale to surprise him—and then I got home to find this had happened."

"Do you love him?"

Kitty frowned. "What's that got to do with it?" she asked. "Of course, I loved him—in a way. He was so handsome and the other girls all envied me. . . . Oh, I don't take much stock in this silly love business," she finished impatiently. "I've seen too many people go loco and make fools of themselves."

The man's arms dropped and he stood back from her.

"Well, I guess you're not hurt much," he said drily. "At least, not enough to run the heels off a good horse like this." He patted Silver's flank, then went on to his own horse. "I'll be sayin' good-by, and get on."

Kitty stood there a moment, watching him make a slight adjustment on his bridle. She was shaking with anger at him, yet somehow she didn't want him to go.

"Wait!" she said suddenly. Her eyes went over his filled saddle-bags. "You riding through, looking for a job?" she asked.

His blue eyes met hers coolly. "Might be," he said.

"What's your name?"

"Dan Kenishaw."

Kitty took a deep breath. "I'm Kitty Lane. I own this ranch you're on, and I hire and fire my own outfit. I'll hire you to ride for me."

His eyebrows shot up. "To ride for you?" he repeated. "Or to help you forget Roy?"

She gasped at his boldness, but recovered herself quickly. "Why not?" she questioned pertly. A plan had just popped into her reckless brain. "Sure, why not? You'll go to the party with me tomorrow night. You'll be a man I met in Denver—" She stopped, overcome by the perfection of her own idea.

"Look here," Dan Kenishaw broke in. "Don't you get any ideas of passing me off as your fiance!"

"Of course not." Kitty laughed and moved over to him. "It'll be better than that. You'll be my husband!"

"Good Lord!" Dan gasped, and slumped limply against his horse. "Why, you crazy, idiotic little—" He ran out of words, tried again. "Don't you see what a mess you'd get us into? After the party—then what?"

"We'll leave," she returned promptly. "We'll go to Denver. I'll visit my aunt there. After a few months, I'll come back alone. Maybe you'll die. Yes, I could wear mourning—I'd look well in it."

"Maybe you could find out I was an escaped bank robber," he said drily. "Well, you can get any ideas like that out of your head! I won't—"

"I already hired you," Kitty told him firmly. "You wanted a job, and this is it. I'll pay you well. Double salary for

a month, and I'll really need you just a few days."

Suddenly Dan grinned. "All right! If you've got nerve enough to do it, I guess I have. Now how do we manage it?"

Kitty looked him over critically. "Dad's clothes will fit you, and he left a lot of good ones. I'll bring you some here tomorrow morning. Then, tomorrow afternoon you'll ride to the ranch, surprising me. I'll say I meant to keep it a secret till you got here—but we'll announce it at the party."

"How about your folks?" he asked.

"I haven't any. There's just old Mrs. Larson, the housekeeper, and if I told her Christmas came in July, she'd believe it. Let me see—Kenishaw. Where shall I say you're from? Kansas City? Chicago?"

"No, just say—well, say I'm one of the mining Kenishaws from Idaho City. There's a mine there owned by the Kenishaws, I think. That settles all the details, doesn't it? I guess all I need to do now, then, is to—kiss my wife good-by." Before Kitty could even gasp, he'd pulled her into his arms and was kissing her.

ITTY did gasp then. She'd been kissed before, of course. She'd played post office scores of times, and of course Roy had kissed her—long, lingering kisses that had left her slightly dizzy. But all the kisses that had gone before were merely play-party stuff compared to this kiss of Dan Kenishaw's. Sparks kindled to leaping flames along her veins. Her pulses leaped, and the very world seemed to tip and sway. Even the sun grew warmer, brighter. . . .

"Dan—Dan!" she whispered, her hands clinging to him.

There was a moment of silence. Dan bent his head, said against her lips: "I've got to practice up on this love business." He pressed his mouth hard against her.

Somehow, Kitty came to her senses. "You—you get away from me!" she flared huskily. "You've no right to kiss me like that!"

"No right to kiss my wife? Why, sweetheart!"

"Get away! And stay away till you're needed—unless you want to get fired!"

Dan laughed. "Oh, no you don't. I like this job. It's the nicest job I ever had—gettin' paid for kisses!" He reached for her again.

But Kitty whirled and, swiftly mounting Silver, rode off toward home. She didn't turn around once.

It was all a joke to Dan Kenishaw, that was obvious. But to her—well, what was it? Anger? Humiliation? Then why was she still aware of the feel of his lips on hers? Why was she trembling so?

Kitty was still thinking of Dan when a group of girls rode over after supper. They said they'd come to welcome her home, but Kitty knew they wanted to see how she was taking the news about Roy.

Even without Dan, Kitty would have held her head high and laughed and pretended she didn't care. Now she could laugh lightly and say, "Looks like it'll be a good marriage. Roy has wanted to put on a white collar for a long time, and Ruth is just right for a banker's wife."

"But weren't you surprised, Kitty?" plump little Nell Gordon asked, her dark eyes alight with curiosity.

Kitty dimpled. "I was too filled with my own surprise to give much thought to it, I guess. After all, Roy and I had broken up, you know. And tomorrow night, I'm springing my little news. . . ."

"Tell us!" the girls chorused. But Kitty just smiled and refused to say another word.

It was then a knock sounded at the door—and in walked Dan.

Kitty's greenish gray eyes flew wide. "Dan!" she gasped.

She almost didn't recognize him. He was dressed in fine new clothes—a bright blue shirt, whipcord trousers and boots of finest tooled leather. His Stetson was white and must have cost a month's pay. When he jerked it off and held it, his red hair shone like molten copper under the lights.

"Dan!" she gasped again, her breath choked at sight of him.

"Darlin'!" he said. "Surprised I got here so soon?"

The next thing Kitty knew, she was in his arms, being held so close she could feel his heart pounding. Then he kissed her—kissed her with a fierce intensity that made the world rock again. For a min-

ute, it even made her forget that the girls were there, watching wide-eyed.

Dan kept his arm about her when the kiss ended. Then he pretended to see the girls for the first time. "Oh, I didn't know you had company, sweetheart! But I'm glad to meet your friends. I want to know them all."

"Oh, of course." Kitty gathered her wits. "Nell, Effie, all of you—this is Dan Kenishaw. I met him in Denver. He's my—my—" but she couldn't get the word out.

Dan took over. "I'm glad to meet my wife's friends," he said.

Nell Gordon caught her breath first. "Your *wife*?" she squealed.

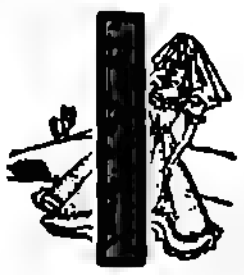
"What?" echoed another voice from the doorway. It was old Selma Larson, the housekeeper. She almost dropped the dish of popcorn she was carrying. "Kitty, are you married?"

Kitty looked at her and nodded mutely. While Mrs. Larsen held her close and kissed her, and Dan parried the questions of the chattering girls, Kitty just sat there, feeling numb. She didn't know whether to hate Dan for jumping the gun this way —or to be proud of the way the girls flocked around him.

For the first time in Kitty's nineteen years, she could find no words to fit her ready tongue.

It seemed ages before the girls finally started for home, giggling, eager to spread the exciting news.

Dan saw them to their buggy, then came back and shut the door behind him. Before he could speak, Kitty ran out of the room and down the hall to her big front bedroom.



IN THE doorway she stopped, her breath catching, her face going crimson. While the girls talked, Mrs. Larson had been busy. The carpet was swept, and there were clean doilies on the marble-topped dresser and bureau. And Kitty's best nightgown and new wrapper was spread over the foot of the crisp counterpane.

Kitty felt sick, realizing what a tricky situation her headstrong planning had brought her into. She was just ready to sink into a chair when Dan spoke from the doorway, where he suddenly stood.

"Mrs. Larson told me to come here," he said easily, as if it were of no more than casual importance.

He grinned, came toward her, and Kitty's heart leaped in a stifled way, choking her. If he took her in his arms again. . . .

She felt the pain of her nails in her palms. "Get away!" she panted.

He stopped, his grin fading. "Do you hate me so very much, Kitty?" he asked.

"Yes—yes, I hate you! Get on your horse and ride away—as fast and as far as you can get!" She clenched her hands still tighter to hide their awful shaking.

Without another word, he turned and strode down the hall. Queerly, as Kitty watched him go, her relief was mixed with a terrible feeling of loss—and fear. She felt as if again she were on Silver—running away—headed toward a deep chasm and perhaps destruction.

* * *

Kitty didn't know when she went to sleep, but the sun was shining brightly when she awoke. For a moment she lay still, trying to sort out her strange hodgepodge of emotions.

Little by little she remembered everything. The humiliation about Roy and Ruth. Meeting Dan. Dan whose hair had flamed redly under the lamplight last night as he took her in his arms and kissed her. Dan's lips on hers—and Dan laughing at her, making a joke of her love, turning it into a shameful thing. . . . Well, she'd sent him away. Now she'd have to face the others and make her explanations.

Mrs. Larson was beaming when she went into the kitchen. "That man of yours, he's wonderful!" she said. "He wouldn't let me wake you. He said to tell you he had to go to the county seat on business. My, he's a gay one, honey!"

A gay one, yes—turning the joke on her. Even the pay she'd offered was a joke; the new clothes he'd bought showed he was no common saddle-tramp seeking a job.

At least, though, he'd stayed at the ranch last night. And he'd given Mrs. Larson an alibi for tonight—one she'd have to use, because he'd never come back, of course. She'd go away tomorrow—say

she was meeting him elsewhere—and they'd have to believe her!

I'm glad I sent him away, she told herself. *Glad he knows I hate him!*

In spite of her gladness, Kitty's heart was a heavy thing. She pretended to keep busy, but all day she was watching, listening.

Mrs. Larsen smiled about it. "These brides," she said. "A minute's like an hour, ain't it, honey?"

"Sure is!" Kitty nodded, smiling back. "And he may not make it back at all. That's an important business trip."

"Well, you've a lifetime ahead to make up for it."

Then—Dan came back.

Just a split second behind him was a wagonload of young folks who tumbled out and called:

"We dropped by for you, Kitty! Thought we'd all drive to the party together. Oh, my—what we've broken into!"

For Dan was hugging Kitty and kissing her. And the high beat of Kitty's heart was no pretense. Dan was here, that was all that mattered.

Riding in the big hay wagon, Dan put his arms about her, holding her tight against him as a loving bridegroom would. Dan even slipped two rings on her finger. A plain gold band and one that sparkled with sets under the pale new moon. "Borrowed 'em," he whispered, "to make it look good."

"Oh, look!" Curious little Nell Gordon had noticed. "The bride is just getting her rings!"

"Why not?" Dan grinned. "Cat's out of the bag now. She's my wife, for all the world to know."

They laughed and chattered and admired the rings, and it seemed no time at all till they came to the Sibley's cabin, set beside the mountain lake that shimmered under the new starlight.

"Mighty pretty," Dan observed, and Kitty was sure she'd never seen such beauty. The lake, the tall cedars that threw black moon-shadows upon it, the tall peak rising behind it. It was magic, all of it, making her throat tighten.

She looked up at Dan, and something more magic than the night seemed to flow through her. It was in Dan's eyes, too. Queerly, time seemed to stop for a long moment. Kitty felt as if the answer to some great question were about to be given. Breathlessly she waited, every fiber of her body atingle. . . .

The wagon stopped. People shouted. Looking up, Kitty saw Roy Oliver, lithe and strikingly handsome, standing beside pretty Ruth Sibley, whose blue eyes were wickedly triumphant. Roy looked embarrassed.

Effie started singing *Here Comes the Bride,* and the others joined in. Ruth smiled smugly—until she saw Kitty and Dan coming up the steps, hand in hand, and Nell cried out, "Meet the bride and groom! Kitty and Dan were married in Denver!"

Ruth's face whitened. She turned on Kitty furiously. "You did it for spite! You—"

Dan laughed. "It was love, my dear. Like a bolt out of the blue, it hit us both." Then, "I'm Dan Kenishaw. And I'm pleased to meet you both." He took Ruth's hand, reached for Roy's limp one and wrung it vigorously.

Everyone crowded around, talking, laughing. Kitty's arm was grasped; she turned and looked into Roy's livid face—the face that had thrilled her pride so often before. He was still the handsomest man in any crowd with his wavy blond hair, deep-set brown eyes fringed by thick lashes and perfectly cut features.

"Kitty, I've got to talk to you," he breathed.

She smiled, wondering how she could even have dreamed she wanted to marry Roy. "It's no use, Roy," she told him.

But Roy was not so easily put off. All through the games and the dancing, he kept trying to get her alone.

Ruth noticed, and made no attempt to hide her fury. Dan went glum, and his glumness stirred Kitty strangely. It was as if he really hated for another man to pay attention to her.

Finally, when a Paul Jones dance brought Roy and Kitty together, Ruth's anger flared out of bounds. She stopped before the couple. "So!" she said to Kitty. "You've schemed all evening, and now you've got Roy for a partner. I hope you feel paid for all your hard work!"

Kitty drew a long breath. She wanted to say. "You can have him." Roy's face

was flushed, the smell of liquor strong on his breath. She was more than ready to hand him over to Ruth.

Then she saw Dan's face. He stood beside Ruth, and his eyes were as hostile as Ruth's own. He said crisply, "Hand him over to his new owner, Kit!"

Somebody laughed, and Kitty's rage bubbled over. "I won't be ordered around!" she blazed, and drew closer to Roy.

Dan's face tightened and for a moment Kitty thought he was going to grab her and shake her. Instead, he called to the fiddlers, "Give us a waltz!" and when they did, danced away with Kitty.

For a time they circled the room in silence, and Kitty's anger waned under the spell of it. She swayed toward Dan.

His arms tightened. He swung her through a side door, and outside, in the darkness, he kissed her fiercely. With her arms about Dan's neck, Kitty returned his kisses.

She kept her arms about his neck when the kiss ended, and leaned her head against his shoulder, breathless under the flashing truth that had suddenly come to her.

She loved Dan Kenishaw! Really loved him!

"Dan," she whispered, lifting her head. "Dan." Then, seeing the strange look in his eyes, she said sharply, "What is it, Dan?"

E LET his arms drop and laughed drily. "So you're ready to make up to me now, the way you made up to Oliver all evening. You little four-flusher, you're so hellbent on matrimony that you don't care where you pick up a man!"

Kitty gaped at him. Then blinding anger filled her. One hand came up hard and slapped him. Then she turned and ran down the path.

Hot tears blinded her eyes, and she paid no attention to what was ahead until she bumped into a figure on the path.

"Kitty." It was Roy, his voice hoarse, his arms grabbing her.

"Leave me alone!" She jerked away from him. "I'm going home."

He held her again. "I'll go with you, Kitty. We'll row across to the Arrowhead line-cabin, and borrow horses there. We'll leave them both flat. Ruth tricked me away from you, and she deserved it. As for that man—" His fingers dug into her arm.

"Kitty, you know you belong to me, don't you, even if I was foolish for a little while? We love each other. We'll get you freed from your husband in some way, and then we'll be married."

"I'll never marry anybody!" Kitty choked out. "I hate all men! But—" she became a little calmer—"you can row me across the lake."

Roy hurried her along the path to the edge of the lake, slipped the rowboat's painter. Then he helped Kitty in and took up the oars. "I'd like to take the canoe," he said, "but the rowboat's safer."

Kitty didn't answer. She sat staring into the water, feeling sicker and more hurt and angry by the minute. Yet, as before, mingled with her hurt and anger, was the memory of Dan's arms about her, his kiss.

Suddenly she lifted her head. "Roy, you're not going across. You're making for the head of the lake."

"Sure." He laughed. "D'ya think I'm lettin' that husband of yours catch up with us? I know where we can hide out. We'll teach 'em a lesson!"

Kitty's eyes widened, remembering what Roy once told her about an abandoned cabin at the head of the lake where nobody ever came. Roy kept a food cache there for hunting trips, but probably nobody else knew about it. If Roy took her there, drunk as he was. . . .

"Roy Oliver, you row me to the Arrowhead!" she cried. "Right now!"

"No." In the faint moonlight Kitty saw unfamiliar firmness. "I'm through bein' ordered around by women. By you, or by Ruth. I'm boss, from here on."

Kitty shivered. She remembered something Mrs. Larson once said, *You can change a strong man's mind, but once a weak one goes stubborn, then look out.* And Roy was weak. Kitty wondered why she'd never realized that before. Weak enough to do any crazy, unpredictable thing.

She looked about swiftly. They were a long way from shore, farther than Kitty

had ever tried to swim, and going farther by the second. But she had no choice. She'd have to wait till the moon passed under a heavy cloud just ahead. Meanwhile, she could get ready.

Slowly, quietly, she pulled one foot back, unbuttoned the high-topped kid shoe and pulled it off. Then she slipped off the other.

All at once the moon disappeared, leaving darkness and cold black waters. Kitty spoke sharply. "There's a log just ahead!"

Roy turned his head, and while he was peering anxiously, Kitty slipped into the water without a sound. In some way she got off the dress, left it floating . . . began swimming toward the Arrowhead shore.

She heard Roy's alarmed oath and realized that he was too befogged to comprehend. Then she heard the creak of the oarlocks going away from her. Roy would expect her to head back toward the Sibley's cabin.

Kitty swam on, shivering in the chill mountain water, her limbs growing heavier and heavier. Panic filled her. She'd never make it! She called out hoarsely, but there was no reply except the creak of the oarlocks, the splash of clumsy oars going away from her. . . .

Stubbornly, hopelessly, filled with growing fear, Kitty kept on swimming. Somehow, the worst part was thinking that Dan might never hold her close again and kiss her. He might never even know that she loved him. . . .

Suddenly a deeper shadow shot over the blackness of the lake. "Kitty! Kitty, darling!" It was Dan.

Kitty gathered all her strength and cried out, and the next instant he was in the water beside her, helping her, steadying the canoe while he lifted her in. Then he was in the canoe, too, wrapping something dry around her and holding her tight in his arms.

"Oh, Kitten, if I'd lost you!" he breathed, his lips against her mouth. Then, his voice harsh with relief, he said gruffly, "Looks like you need somebody to keep you out of trouble, you harum-scarum little fool! Reckon I'm gonna have to really marry you."

"Oh, Dan!" Kitty said.

But he wasn't quite ready to kiss her. "We'll slip over the state line and make our play-actin' come true," he said. "Then I'm buying your ranch like I came here to do—after I sold my share of the Kenishaw mine. And then you and I are goin' settle down!"

Kitty didn't object. She didn't object, either, when his lips found her own and filled the night with throbbing glory. The answer to the great question had been given—and it was the right answer.

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By Ruth Herbert

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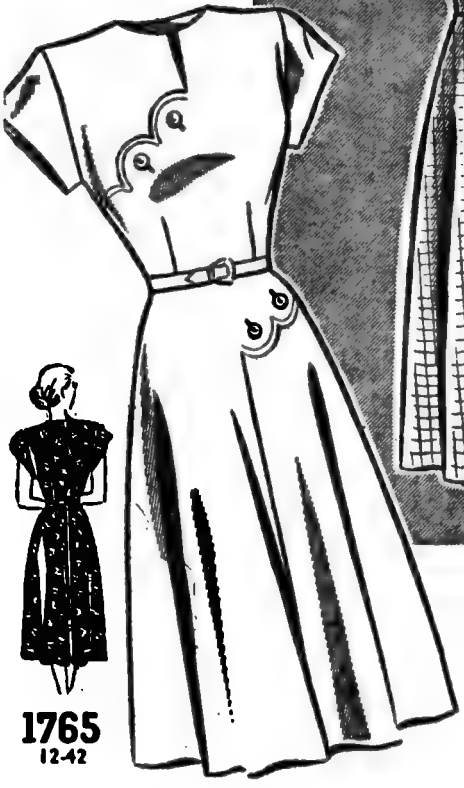

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Love-struck Merilee played a tantalizing game of cheek-to-cheek with the Union officer—to protect her guerrilla sweetheart.

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He said casually: "I made a little wager with some of my fellow officers—that you'd step out with me tonight. . . ."

THE LADY REBEL

By Bill Severn

CHAPTER ONE

Dancehall Gal

THE flame of her red satin skirt flashed against the white of her skin as Merilee Saunders danced. Her tumbling black hair, tossing free to the high-kicking rhythm, gave her dancing

a sense of abandon that brought cheers from the reveling soldiers in San Francisco's Golden Barbary cafe. Merilee's smile teased and her dark eyes flirted. But inwardly, she was gripped with a fear that even the joy of seeing Philip again could not quiet.

Carefully, she avoided looking in his direction. She had known Philip would come to her when he heard she was dancing here. Merilee had crossed the continent from New Orleans to find him, slipped through the lines that marked the struggle between North and South in that war-torn year of 1864. Philip was a wanted man. The soldiers with whom he mingled in this cafe would use their guns instead of laughter if they guessed the roughly-dressed gold miner who sat with them was Philip Ashton.

Lifting her skirt to the saucy swing of her hips as she finished the dance, Merilee took her bows and threw kisses to the crowd. Her smile died as the flimsy curtain fell. Her entire body went weak with anxiety as she crossed the platform to the rickety wooden steps and went down them to her dressing room to wait for Philip.

Merilee had heard the bitter talk about his dream of empire. Philip had dedicated himself to the plan of seizing independence for California and aligning the Pacific coast with the Confederacy.

Philip must listen to reason before it was too late. If he loved her, he would realize why she had come to him. He would go away with her someplace, take the happiness their love could make and quit this business before it ended in tragedy.

Merilee swung open her dressing room door. Her steps halted. Fear struck her spine and left her motionless. In the chair before her low-mirrored dressing table sat an army lieutenant. Had he come to seize Philip? Was this the end, before she and Philip could even meet again?

As she stared at him, wondering desperately how she could warn Philip, the lieutenant grinned and got up from the chair. He didn't look like a man about to capture or kill an enemy.

His blue-gray eyes touched over her slowly, warmly, missing nothing as they lifted to hers. It was the way the men the other side of the tin-reflected footlights had looked at her when she danced, eager for the light-hearted kind of romance her dancing and her laughter had stirred in them. If he wanted that, she knew how to deal with him.

"What do you want?" Merilee's hands went to her hips. "What are you doing here?"

"Please, ma'am, don't be angry." His grin broadened. "Lieutenant Hugh Knox," he introduced. He said casually, "I made a little wager with some of my fellow officers—that you might step out with me tonight. . . ."

"I can guess." Merilee's heart lifted with the relief of knowing this was just another soldier making a play for her. He hadn't come for Philip. "Sorry, Lieutenant. I'm afraid you lose your bet."

His expression didn't change, as he lazily got to his feet. If he heard her, he gave no sign. Without the slightest warning, his arms came around her, pulled her close. Firmly, deliberately, he kissed her.

Dancing her way across the continent, Merilee had learned how to handle men. But none of them had ever swept away her self-assurance like this. For a full minute, she stayed in his arms, lost to him as she felt her own unreasoned response to the demand of his kiss. Her heart ran away with her pulses and left her no defense.

Was it because of Philip? Had she been so upset that this unexpected boldness robbed her of the easy laughter that would have turned aside this soldier before he dared do this? Merilee pulled herself free.

"Was that part of the bet, too?" She strode to the door. "This is the way out, Lieutenant!"

He didn't move. His grin came back. "So all that teasing and winking eyes out there on the stage is make-believe? I'm glad you're not as easy as you act, Merilee." Hugh laughed softly. "But there's no harm in having a little fun. Come dancing with me. Have supper. I'll bet down deep you're as lonely for a good time as I am."

"I dance for a living."

She opened the door. "I don't want to get you into trouble with your commandant, but I can call the military

police." She pointed to the corridor. "Will you please leave now?" Glancing along the hall, she saw Philip. He must have heard them in the dressing room and gone back from the door.

Philip's head was turned in the other direction, as if he were waiting at the steps for one of the girls from the ensemble. Merilee sensed that Hugh had followed her glance. Quickly, she looked away from Philip.

"Please," Hugh said. "If you won't have supper with me, at least let me walk you to your hotel—so the men will see me with you."

She had to get rid of the lieutenant. As long as he stood here arguing, Philip was in danger. Perhaps Philip wouldn't be recognized, but his loitering in the corridor might lead to suspicion.

"I should be furious." Merilee forced a smile and sighed. "But I know how it is with a soldier who's miles from home." She found the easy laughter she hadn't been able to summon before. "All right. You can walk me home—but as far as the hotel."

"I'll be honored, ma'am."

She touched his arm. "Wait outside at the entrance until I change."

Hugh grinned and gave her a mock salute. "I'll be waiting."

MERILEE watched him go, kept her smile fixed until he turned the corridor. She hurried forward then, her arms lifted to take Philip close, her mouth eager for the kisses she remembered.

Philip faced her. His lips were tight, his eyes angry. He jerked his head. "In your dressing room." Philip strode along the hall toward the door.

Merilee stared after him. Was this the way Philip welcomed her, after all the months they had been apart?

She shook her head. She wasn't being fair. Philip could never let himself forget he was a hunted man. Merilee followed him slowly. She shut the door behind her, her eyes finding him again, searching for the man she had loved.

Philip was still darkly handsome through the disguise of the scraggly miner's beard he had grown. But he seemed much older, more severe. There was a craftiness in his eyes, a prideful hardness to his mouth.

"I can't believe it," he said. "You—Merilee Saunders of Louisiana—appearing here as a cheap dance hall girl. All these months, I've thought of you as part of home, secure in our family traditions, waiting for my return. I don't understand."

"I have no home, Philip. My brothers are both dead. The plantation is gone, the country ruined." Her eyes lifted to his. "I had to come to you. I didn't know how to find you. But I knew you would find me if I danced here. I paid my way by dancing. It was the only practical thing I knew to do."

"They killed your brothers!" He put his hands on her shoulders.

"The war killed them," Merilee said. She moved closer. "That's really why I came to you. You can't go on fighting this senseless battle out here. Even father said you were wrong about it. It's no part of anything. Philip, I love you. I want to be with you."

"Stop fighting?" He backed from her. "Don't talk like that! As long as the flag of the Confederacy still flies for state rights and the will of the people—"

"It's a matter of months until surrender. It has to come." Merilee shook her head. "You've been away from the worst of it. I've seen the soldiers of both sides, the pain and suffering and heartaches. Nothing you can do in California will affect the war now."

"You're speaking like a traitor!"

"No, Philip—like a woman." Merilee put her arms around him. "Aren't you even glad I came? Oh, darling, Philip, darling."

He kissed her. But it wasn't real. It wasn't even as real as the impetuous soldier's kiss Hugh had taken just in fun. Was this the love she had come miles to claim? Was this chilled kiss the symbol of the future she had wanted, the reward for the hardship she had endured in finding Philip?

He took his arms away. "You've changed, Merilee. The girl I left back home wouldn't have carried on with the enemy the way you were with that lieutenant." His hands clenched at his sides.

So, that was why Philip was so cold. He spoke of war and his ideals, but it was plain jealousy that really bothered him—the jealousy of a man who finds his girl with someone else. "You should know better," Merilee said. "Do you think I came to California to be with other men? I had to protect you. It was the only way I could get rid of the lieutenant."

Philip looked at her a minute. Gradually, he smiled and some of the tension went out of his expression. "I do know better. Finding you like this was such a shock." He gripped her shoulders. "I'm taking you out of this, Merilee—down to the southern part of the state. Tonight! We have friends, our kind of people. You'll learn we haven't lost yet. California must be free! As long as one state stands independent, the war has not been lost!"

"But what you're doing is no part of the war. There's no reason—"

His kiss—more like the kisses she remembered—silenced her. "Poor Merilee," he said. "You've been through so much."

This was no time to argue with Philip. He had been away so long he didn't know even his own people considered him almost a deserter for having stayed in California when he might have served at home. But the way Philip held her now in his arms, Merilee was sure she could make him realize their future together meant more than the false dream of Pacific empire.

"Yes," she whispered. "Take me with you, Philip."

"Be ready outside your hotel," he said, "in about an hour. One bag—it's all we can take. I have a contact to make. Then, I'll meet you there with a wagon."

"Philip." She went to him. "Be careful."

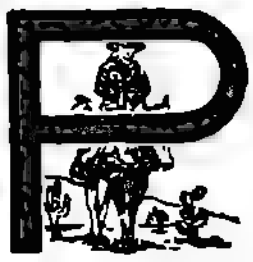
"Don't worry." He smiled. "Destiny is on our side, Merilee."

When he had left, she sighed after him a moment and then took off her costume and changed into her street clothes. Fastening the snaps of her green taffeta gown, her hand stopped and her head lifted so that her eyes met their own reflection in the mirror.

Lieutenant Hugh Knox! For a moment, she had forgotten. He was waiting for her, too.

CHAPTER TWO

Hide and Seek



PINNING her egret-plumed hat at a jaunty angle, Merilee left the Golden Barbary as though she had nothing more to worry her than a meeting with the dashing lieutenant who waited at the door. But there was no time to waste. She had to get to the hotel, pack her things and be ready for Philip. Still, she couldn't act in a way that would put questions in Hugh's mind.

"You took long enough." He grinned and offered his arm. "I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you."

"Sorry, I had to fix my hair." But she knew Hugh must have guessed she hadn't spent all that time dressing. "Where are your friends, Lieutenant?"

"I got away from them," he said.

Merilee's head came up. "But I thought you wanted them to see us together, so you could collect your bet?"

Hugh stopped walking. "There was no bet." He turned her to face him. "I had to meet you, Merilee. It was the only way I could get you to go out with me."

"I'm not going out with you. I said you could walk me to the hotel. But I wouldn't have if I'd known it was a trick."

"You're angry?"

"I'm sure you'll find a girl who'll be glad to entertain you, Lieutenant. Sorry, I'm not the type."

"You're my type." Hugh stepped in front of her. "I don't want just any girl. I guess I can't blame you for what you must be thinking, but it's not like that. Merilee, I'm in love with you."

She looked right at him. But her laughter didn't come as quickly as she intended. "You can save the pretty words. I've heard them before."

"This is the truth. The first night I saw you dance, I knew it. I've been coming to the Barbary every night for a week, knowing you were the girl I've been searching for all my life. Merilee, I'm asking you to marry me."

"Marry—marry you?" She stared. "Don't be crazy! I never met you before tonight, never even knew you were alive!"

"You know now that I'm alive." He took both her hands. "You knew when I kissed you. Maybe it can't happen this fast—but I had to tell you, so you'd understand I'm not just a soldier having his fling."

"I don't want anything from you!" She drew her breath. Glancing up, she saw the moonlight full on his face a moment, deep in his eyes. "Of all the insane things I've ever heard, this is just about the most—"

"I love you," he said again. His hands kept hers, pulled her close. Without seeming to struggle, his arms took her and his lips claimed hers. "All I'm asking," he whispered, "is that you give us a chance to know each other better."

She knew better. Merilee wasn't a fool and she wasn't a child. But, for a wild moment, she almost could believe him. His words might be a lie, a soldier's smooth cleverness, a boldly direct attempt to startle her and sweep her off her feet. But Merilee could not deny she liked the way Hugh kissed her. Her heart pounded with a want to be loved.

Still, she had saved her love for Philip all these months of longing. How could she think of letting herself respond so willingly to a stranger's impulsive demand for reckless romance? Merilee tore herself free. Without a word, she swung around and strode along the plank walk toward her hotel.

Her cheeks flamed with the humiliation of her momentary eagerness, the acceptance she had quieted too late to hide from Hugh. Her anger grew with each forward step. She was more angry at herself than with him.

Hugh came beside her. "There's no need to run."

"Can't you leave me alone?" She walked faster.

"No," he said. "Not now. I won't ever leave you alone, Merilee." Hugh increased his stride to keep up with her. "And you don't want me to."

"How dare you say such a thing!"

"Because it's true." He caught her arm, stopped her. His grip was firm.

The wind pulled at her hat, tipped the brim to reveal her face. She lifted her hand to hold the hat in place. A dancing puff of air billowed beneath her skirt. Merilee dropped her arm to halt the sudden upward swirl of whispering taffeta. "If you don't stop bothering me, I—I'll—"

"You bother me the same way." He grinned.

"Oh!" The wind struck again. The hatpin pulled from her hair. "My hat!" She watched it blow away, skitter along the dirt street in the moonlight.

Laughing, Hugh chased it. Merilee's glance followed him and her eyes narrowed with decision. Drawing her breath hard, she turned abruptly and ran toward the hotel.

She heard him call her name. Gathering the folds of her skirt in one hand, she raced along the walk and into the hotel lobby. Quickly, Merilee walked to the stairs and went up them to her room.

CLOSING her door, she leaned against it. Listening, her chest heaving and her heart thumping from the exertion of running, she twisted the key in the lock. But there was no sound on the stairs.

She was rid of him now. She would be leaving with Philip. She would never see Hugh again.

Merilee crossed to the window and pulled the curtain. She lighted the oil lamp and took a small traveling bag from beneath the bed. She went to the bureau and sorted her things, trying to decide what to take.

She wondered at herself. All the times she had thought how glad she would be to leave—why was she so hesitant now? Hugh? She shook her head. It had nothing to do with him. She finished packing finally, darkened the lamp and lifted the curtain to watch the street from the window. Beyond the flat hotel roof, the city was clear in bright moonlight. Looking down at the street, her body tensed. Her fingers tightened against the wood of the window frame.

Hugh! He hadn't followed to her room, but he was waiting outside on the street. His words came back to her, the determination with which he had spoken them: *"I won't ever leave you alone, Merilee."* Had the light told him she hadn't retired for the night? Had Hugh guessed she

intended to leave the hotel again tonight?

As she stared, two other soldiers stopped to talk to Hugh. After a moment, they went on again, crossing over into the darkness on the hotel side of the street. He glanced up in the direction of her room.

Was this a trap to capture Philip? Frightened now, Merilee wondered if she had been too quick to take Hugh's interest in her as entirely personal. Had he been bold to blind her to his man-hunt of Philip?

But he could have captured Philip at the Golden Barbary—unless he hadn't recognized him in the disguise of a loitering miner. Was she letting her imagination run away with her? After all, the soldiers who had paused to talk to Hugh might be only friends recognizing a fellow officer as they happened to pass by. And the way he had kissed her, could he pretend that feeling if his mind were on the affairs of war?

But she couldn't take a chance with Philip's safety. If this was a trap, Merilee wouldn't lead Philip into it.

Deciding, she lifted the small bag and mentally measured the drop from the window to the flat roof. Keeping herself in the shadows, she would be able to climb around the roof to the fire stairs at the rear of the hotel. While Hugh watched the front entrance, she could head the back way down the street a few blocks and intercept Philip.

Merilee climbed out the window, dropped to her hands and knees. Moving the bag ahead of her, she crept forward. She reached the corner of the building. There was a light in the window of the end room, but once she crossed it she would be safe. Crouching, Merilee made a scurrying dash for the darkness of the other side.

Her sudden motion shook the bag from her hand. It clattered loudly to the tin roof. The window shot up and a man's head poked out. He saw her. "Stop!" he yelled. "Stop, thief!"

Merilee stumbled, fought to free herself from the tangle of her dress. She got to her feet, grabbed the bag, ran across the roof to the fire stairs and hurried down them. Looking across the street as she ran, she saw Hugh had discovered her. He hurried to her.

"Merilee!"

Lights sprang on all over the hotel. Hugh caught his arm around her, swept her into a darkened doorway. "Down!" He pulled her with him to the planks. Held close, she felt the lift and fall of his breathing. "We'll wait a minute," he said. "Then, we'll get up and walk along like we just happened to be strolling past."

Numbly, Merilee nodded.

"All right," he whispered. He lifted her to her feet. "Walk slowly. We're just a couple out for an evening's fun." He glanced down. "Leave the bag."

Merilee stepped out into the full moonlight beside him, desperately trying to decide what she should do. He looked at her again. Swearing softly, Hugh pulled her back into the doorway. "We can't get away with that," He touched her. "Your dress is torn. They'll know you were the one who was on the roof."

She looked down at the ripped material. She must have done that when she fell. The hem of her gown was ragged.

"We'll go the other way." Taking her hand, Hugh ran with her. Safely around the corner, he stopped. "You'd better tell me what this is all about. I can't help you unless I know."

Merilee looked up, searching his eyes. Was Hugh pretending? Had he taken her from the hotel to avoid a disturbance that might keep Philip away from the trap set for him? She sensed he was struggling within himself to keep secret something he wanted to say. Intuitively, she decided to be wary.

"I know it sounds weird," she said, "but—I had another date. I saw you standing out front and I was afraid you'd annoy me again. The back steps seemed the easiest way to avoid you."

"You were that afraid of me?"

"I didn't have time to argue."

He shook his head. "Suppose you tell me the truth, Merilee? You weren't carrying a traveling bag because you had another date—not unless you're running away with him."

"It's none of your business what I was doing!" Her head tilted angrily. "All right, I am running away! I'm eloping. I'm marrying a—a miner I met at the Barbary. That's why I didn't want you to

start trouble or follow me. He—he's a very jealous man."

"A miner, is he?" His tone said he knew she was lying. How much more did he know?

"Yes!" She looked past Hugh.

There was an abrupt movement in the darkness close to the buildings. Merilee's heart stilled. Was her imagination playing tricks? It might have been nothing more than the changing light of a momentary cloud across the moon.

"You love him?" Hugh asked.

"Certainly, I love him!"

She saw the motion behind Hugh once more. It was all she could do to keep from shouting as the shadows took shape. *Philip!*

Hugh reached for her hands. "You can't run off with him like this, Merilee." His head bent to kiss her. His lips brushed hers. She shut her eyes, fighting the desire to scream.

Hugh's mouth jerked from hers as the blow landed. She felt his arms sag and drop from around her. With a groan Hugh plunged forward, his hands clutching at her as he slid to the ground. Then all was still.

Philip struck again, leaning over him. Merilee saw the flash of the heavy gun butt in the moonlight. The metal crashed down. "Philip!" She seized his arm. "Stop!"

Hugh lay quiet at her feet. She could hear his labored breathing.

"Come on!" Philip slipped the gun back under his jacket, took her arm and began leading her away.

"No! We can't leave him here like this! Philip, you can't—"

"Quiet!" Philip clamped his hand over her mouth. "You roused half the city getting away from the hotel. Haven't you given me enough trouble? This is war, not some kind of a crazy game you're playing."

Philip put his fingers to his lips, whistled twice. There was an answering whistle from down the street, the rumble of a wagon and horses coming fast. He swept her up into his arms, carried her to the curb.

Merilee was sobbing as Philip put her in the wagon. All she could think about was Hugh lying there.

CHAPTER THREE

Luscious Captive

THE wagon seemed to roll endlessly away from the coast south of San Francisco, climbing the rough road into the hills. Philip made no attempt to comfort her beyond saying, "War never is nice, Merilee."

"There's no need for war here," she told him. "There's nothing you can win, nothing you can do but cause pain for yourself and those who love you."

"We can win freedom for California!"

"No, Philip. Not now."

"You talk like a Yankee. I'm afraid you've come to think like one, too."

"I'm thinking of us," she said softly. "If you had been home during the worst of it, you wouldn't want to spread that kind of violence here."

"This is something bigger than us." Philip's back stiffened. "I wonder if it's me you're worried about, or that Union lieutenant? Kissing him, letting him make love to you!"

"I told you—"

"That you were trying to get rid of him to protect me?" His laugh was hard.

"What do you believe?"

"I don't know what to think. But until I can find out what you're up to, I'm keeping you where you can be watched."

"Philip!"

"Maybe you're just mixed up. I hope that's all. I'm still in love with you, Merilee. But no woman's making a fool of me."

"You don't love me enough to trust me?"

"There are some things more important than love."

Was this the man who had told her, *"Whatever happens, I'll always love you. Nothing can change that."?* That was the Philip she loved, the man she had crossed the continent to find. Not this bitterly proud stranger beside her, with his twisted way of thinking he could accomplish what armies had failed to do.

The wagon stopped finally in a small clearing, deep in the woods. Merilee could see nothing at first in the semi-darkness except the tall trees that cloaked the road. Blinking, as Philip helped her

out, she discovered the hulk of a small cabin, far down the slope, almost hidden by the surrounding forest.

Questioningly, she looked at Philip. "You'll stay here tonight," he said. "There are some things I must do. Tomorrow, when it's safe, I'll come for you."

"You—you're going to leave me here alone?"

"There's a Mexican who'll see to your needs. Miguel will care for you as if you were my sister."

"Philip, no! I want to be with you." Merilee moved close, slipped her arms around him. "This business you have tonight, can't it wait? There's so much we have to talk about."

Firmly, he put her out of his arms. "We can talk tomorrow."

The flat, unemotional tone of Philip's words stung as if he had slapped her.

"That's how little I mean to you?" She asked the question as though she were thinking it aloud.

"Stop acting like a dance hall girl."

Her face flamed. "You're the one who has changed, Philip—not me. You used to have a heart and blood in your veins." Merilee tossed back her hair. "You used to be a man!"

"The *lady* I knew would never address a gentleman that way." He lifted his fingers to his mouth, whistled.

A tiny splinter of light flicked beneath the crack at the bottom of the cabin door. After a minute, the door opened. An elderly Mexican came out cautiously, carrying a lamp. His watery eyes showed no surprise at seeing Merilee. Philip spoke to him in Spanish. Miguel gave an affirmative grunt, stepped aside to let them enter.

"He'll sleep on his blanket in front of the cabin," Philip said. "You'll have it to yourself. I'll return tomorrow, as soon as I finish my work."

"You needn't come for me! I won't be here!"

"I think you will." Philip paused at the door, came back to her. Quickly, almost roughly, he took her in his arms and gave her a brusque kiss. "It's a man's place to make the decisions. If you've forgotten that, it's something you'd better learn again."

Merilee pushed him away. "I've learned a lot tonight! I've learned how wrong a girl can be!"

Philip's mouth twisted in a half-smile. "I'm excusing you for being upset, Merilee. Good night."

He shut the door. Merilee's anger choked on the rest of what she wanted to say.

SHE couldn't stay here. She wouldn't! Somehow, she would get back to 'Frisco. Merilee opened the door. The Mexican was on the step outside. Alertly, he got to his feet. "You speak English?" she asked.

Miguel lifted his shoulders in a non-committal shrug.

"I'm getting out. I'm leaving. Even if I have to walk all the way." Merilee took a step.

He shook his head and moved in front of her, nodding for her to return to the cabin.

"I'm not a prisoner! Philip can't keep me here and you won't!" She started forward.

Miguel's hand whipped up so swiftly, the motion was hardly more than a blur. His fingers gripped a frighteningly dangerous-looking knife. Merilee drew back. Without pointing it at her, he gestured that she was to go inside and shut the door.

"You wouldn't dare!" Merilee searched his eyes, trying to hide her fear. "I don't know what orders Philip gave you, but he must have warned you not to harm me."

It was obvious he didn't understand. Merilee's eyes narrowed. Carefully, she fixed a smile. She raised her hand to her mouth in a drinking motion, as if she were thirsty and wanted a cup of water.

Miguel grunted and nodded toward the cabin again, waiting for her to go in ahead of him. Still holding the knife, he lifted a water bottle from one of the row of wall pegs, put it on the table. Watching her intently, he took a battered cup from the shelf and blew the dust from it. He held it out to her.

Merilee poured the water, filled the cup. She raised it a few inches. Suddenly, she splashed the water full in his face. Wheeling around, she ran from the cabin,

raced across the clearing toward the trees.

She heard his shout, the pound of his boots behind her. Merilee stumbled, caught herself against an enormous pine tree, hugged herself there momentarily, fighting to get her breath. There was an abrupt suck of air at her side, a high-whining sound. She felt her dress pull as though some unseen hand had tugged at her skirt.

Glancing down, Merilee saw the shivering blade of the knife Miguel had hurled. He had thrown it so it would miss her, but the point pinned the sweep of her skirt firmly against the trunk of the tree. Merilee tore at the material. With both hands, she reached down and ripped the twisted cloth free from her ankles.

Plunging forward, she dove into the protective covering of brush and darkness. Crouching low, she crept through the forest tangle, the branches scratching her bare feet below the ragged remnant of her dress. She found a hollow beside the road, lay in it face down, scarcely daring to breathe.

From almost beside her, she heard Miguel's high-voiced, excited swearing. The words were Spanish, but she understood the tone. If he caught her now, he wouldn't be gentle with her, no matter what orders Philip had given.

He turned from the road finally, hurried back toward the cabin. Probably he had gone for a lantern. Merilee waited a second. Scrambling to her feet, she ran wildly along the road. Her hair tumbled loose, fell before her eyes. Sweeping it back, driving herself with all her strength, she raced on until her lungs burned so she had to stop.

There must be a good distance between them now. But Miguel would follow the road with his lantern, trail the footprints left in the crested dirt by her flat-heeled shoes. Merilee sat in the road and took off her shoes.

Barefooted, she moved away from the road and into the woods once more, holding her shoes, trying to keep her sense of direction. The ground became damp and cold beneath her feet. Her toes sank into matted grass, and water oozed between them. Merilee walked a dozen yards more, pulled aside the branches. A narrow, marshy stream wound its muddy silver through the trees. She had to go ahead.

She couldn't go back. She waded into it. The water stuck her clothes, chilled her. She reached the other side, dragged herself on until she found dry earth. Exhausted, Merilee dropped to the ground.

How long she sat huddled there, half-drugged with the weariness that sapped her strength, she didn't know. When she rose to go on again, the sky was clear with moonlight. Working her way through the brush, she stopped and strained forward to listen.

There was a pattering sound on the road, coming the opposite direction from the cabin. A single horse, riding hard.

Merilee ran to the road, praying she would reach it before the rider sped beyond her. Standing astride the crest of the road, Merilee waved both arms and shouted with all the voice she could find.

The horse slowed, pulled in abruptly. Merilee stared at the rider. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if some mirage of exhaustion had blinded her and put his image before her. She looked again, still not believing what she saw.

"Merilee!" His startled shout made the illusion real. It *was* Hugh!

She ran forward, sobbing, too overwhelmed to speak.

He swung down from the saddle, took her in his arms. "Merilee—what happened?"

"You followed me," she whispered, holding him close. "You said you wouldn't let me go. You came to me."

CHAPTER FOUR

Moonlight Enchantment

HUGH kissed her. His arms were tight, secure. Eagerly, Merilee took strength from his embrace. There would be time later for questions. For now, his nearness was answer enough.

But Hugh drew back from her. She saw a struggle in his eyes as he lowered his arms and stepped away. "Where's Ashton?"

"You—know about—Philip?"

"I should know." He touched his hand to the side of his head. His mouth went

hard. "You led me into that beating right sweetly." Hugh twisted around. "Is this another trick to let him jump me from behind?"

"He's not here. I don't know where he is. I don't care!"

"You're his girl." Hugh studied her. His glance touched over her tattered dress, the wild tangle of her hair. "You had a fight with him?" His voice softened. "Did Ashton do this to you?"

"I was wrong about him." She met his glance. "I had to get away from him." Haltingly, she told Hugh what had happened at the cabin. "Philip's so changed. He's nothing like the man I loved."

"You look mussed up enough to be telling the truth." He grinned a bit. "I reckon even an actress wouldn't go this far to make up a story."

The directness of his grin brought a warmth to her cheeks. Merilee smoothed her hands to her ruined dress, pulled the twisted material. Remembering the way she had thrown herself into his arms, she avoided his eyes.

"You mean it, don't you? You are through with Ashton?" Hugh reached for her. "Merilee."

"There's no need to pretend." Swiftly, she moved back. "We understand each other now. You were after Philip, not me. That was why you put on a show of making love to me." Merilee shook her head. "It's all right, Hugh. I guess we both felt we had to tell a few lies." She forced the smile. "No wonder you said such crazy things—about wanting to marry me."

"It wasn't all a lie." Hugh took her hand. "The army knew who you were. We had a file on you when you turned up at the Golden Barbary, intelligence figured you and Ashton would get together sooner or later. It was my job to watch you.

"But it became more than a job. The way you danced, you flaming alive with your eyes and your smile. . . . It was because I couldn't keep my mind on the work I had to do that Ashton slipped away from me in 'Frisco tonight." His voice deepened with the meaning of his words. "When I kissed you, I forgot everything else but—" He paused, looking at her for a second.

Hugh kissed her again. He didn't have to say the rest. That kiss said it for him. She could believe him; she had to believe what was in her heart.

Holding him, loving him, giving all of herself to that embrace, Merilee understood why her heart had rebelled against the chill kisses Philip had given her. That lost dream of Philip was nothing against this reality.

He kept his arm snug around her waist. Looking down at her, his eyes crinkled at the corners and he grinned once more. "You're a tiny thing with your shoes off. Just about big enough to fit into my pocket."

"It's an idea." She laughed warmly. "Which pocket do you want me in?"

"I'm afraid army regulations would be against it." Hugh laughed with her. Tapping her shoes, he said, "Shall I help you put them on?"

Merilee gave them to Hugh as he bent down. He slipped on the shoes and swung his arm under her knees to lift her from the ground. Carrying her, Hugh boosted Merilee into the saddle and slid into place behind her.

Eyes closed, she leaned against him, her head on his shoulder and her fingers locked in his. They rode for minutes that way before she opened her eyes to the moonlight once more. Merilee frowned. "This isn't the way back to San Francisco."

"I want you to show me Ashton's cabin."

She sat up a little. "You're still after Philip, is that it?"

"I came to get him," he said slowly. "It's what I have to do."

Merilee shifted in the saddle so she could see his face. "And you think I'll lead you to him? You expect me to betray Philip?" Her back stiffened.

"You said you were through with him."

"I am. But—was all of this part of your plan to chase him? You're still trying to use me?"

"Don't talk like that! Ashton has nothing to do with us. This is my duty."

"Philip spoke that way, too. Hugh, please—hasn't there been enough trouble?"

"He's making the trouble. Ashton and a small, stubborn band of men. Their

plan can't succeed, but they could stir up needless shooting. The Confederacy ordered Ashton back to Virginia a year ago, but he refused to give up this broken dream of a Pacific empire."

"Then, why can't you forget about him—let it die out?"

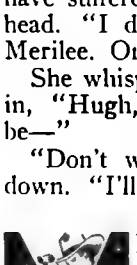
"It's not my decision to make. I have orders to find him. After I look over the cabin, we'll head back to 'Frisco. I'll leave you in the city and bring back enough troops to take Ashton without shooting. He told you he was returning to the cabin for you tomorrow, didn't he?"

"I won't help you. No matter what I think of him, Phillip fought for the cause for which my brothers gave their lives."

"I know how you feel," Hugh said quietly. "It'll be a great day when families can be together again in peace. And it will come soon now—it has to. Both sides have suffered too much." He shook his head. "I don't expect you to help me, Merilee. Only let me do what I must."

She whispered as they neared the cabin, "Hugh, be careful. Miguel might be—"

"Don't worry, darling." He climbed down. "I'll come right back."



MERILEE watched him go, a tall, square-shouldered shadow, blending with the others in the fading moonlight that would soon be morning. Already, there was a hint of pale red sun.

Hugh was lost finally in the darkness that surrounded the cabin. Tensely, Merilee waited. Softly, she whispered his name, as if she were saying a prayer for him.

There was a sudden shout, the sound of scuffling. The orange-red flare of a gun flamed, followed by the slap of its firing. "Hugh!" Merilee kicked her heels to the horse, raced it forward.

Riding close, Merilee saw Hugh was still standing. His arms were swinging hard, pounding the figure before him. As they grappled, the other man's face was revealed to her. Philip! He had come back to the cabin tonight!

Philip must have fired at Hugh. The shot had gone wild. But where was the Mexican? Merilee dropped herself from

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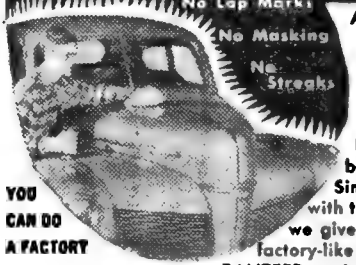

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the saddle. Hugh had Philip against the cabin wall, driving his fists with the full weight of his body. The cabin door opened. Miguel!

Merilee saw the momentary flash of the long knife. "Look out!" she screamed.

Hugh whirled, lifted his arm to block the downward slash of the blade. As he turned, Philip fell back a dozen steps. Philip's hand whipped beneath his jacket, came out with a snubbed-off shoulder gun. "Hold it, Lieutenant! I've got the drop and I won't miss this time if you ask for it!"

Miguel lighted a lamp and put it on the table. Philip kept the gun against Hugh's side. "You should know better than to trust a woman, Lieutenant." Philip's voice was as cold as the metal blade Miguel had slipped back beneath his belt. "Sometimes, a little mouse of a girl can change the history of a nation."

Hugh stared at him. His eyes shifted to her. She saw the pain in them, the hurt doubt and disbelief. "So, it was a trap?"

"No! Hugh, you can't believe—"

"Congratulations, Merilee," Philip cut her off. His curt bow mocked her. "I know you're fond of the lieutenant. It wasn't an easy task for you to deliver him to me, but I couldn't have taken him alone."

"Hugh! He's lying!"

"Is he?" Hugh's eyes shut. "You told me about your brothers. I should have known."

"She's clever at making men believe in her." Philip's laugh was harsh. "It's a rather cruel technique, using her charms to trick the enemy— You followed Merilee as we thought you would after that little pushing around you got tonight in San Francisco. And you took this road because it was the one where your intelligence reports indicated I had my headquarters. Too bad."

SHE went to Hugh, gripped his arms, tried to make him look at her. "I had nothing to do with it! I begged you to stay away from the cabin. I don't know what Philip's plans are. What I told you was the truth. Hugh, I love you."

"Miguel!" Philip jerked his head. *"La reata!"*

The Mexican took a rope from the wall peg.

"Now, we'll have a little talk, Lieutenant. I want to know how many men were in the troop detachment sent down from San Francisco a week ago—what arms they had."

"You think I'm that easy, Ashton?"

"I can make you talk!" Philip lifted his shoulders. "I trust you won't force me to be unpleasant."

Merilee's eyes fixed on the gun in Philip's hand. Carefully, she measured the distance. Glancing up as if he sensed what was in her mind, Philip tightened his grip on the weapon and motioned Miguel to tie Hugh's arms.

Whatever Philip had felt for her must be as dead as her love for him. But she had attracted him once. Even if he hated her now, wasn't she woman enough to distract Philip for the moment it would take Hugh to break free? *"Sometimes,"* Philip had said, *"a little mouse of a girl can change the history of a nation."*

Little mouse? Merilee smiled.

Abruptly, Merilee screamed. "A mouse!" She leaped to the table. Lifting her torn skirt around her legs, she pointed with her other hand. "Look! There's a mouse right down there! Oh, please—somebody, chase the thing!"

Instinctively, Philip looked at the floor and then at her. "Stop screaming!" He stepped toward her, his eyes lingering a second on her. For that instant, she knew his mind wasn't on the gun in his hand.

Merilee swung her leg high, planted a dancer's kick hard against his wrist. The gun spun from Philip's hand, skittered across the floor.

Hugh's arms were tied, but he hurled himself at Philip, crashed down with him. Behind them, the Mexican reached for the knife at his belt. Merilee jumped.

She landed on Miguel's back. Kicking, pounding, twisting like a wildcat as she locked herself upon him, Merilee sank her teeth into the Mexican's shoulder. With a scream, he threw up his arm and the knife went flying.

Hugh was on the floor, Philip on top of him. They rolled over and Hugh twisted

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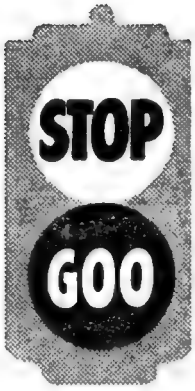

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one arm free of the rope. Ducking the lunge of Philip's fist, Hugh grinned at Merilee.

It was a grin that went wide across his face. That grin told her Hugh knew the truth. He got the gun. "Don't make me use it, Ashton!" He touched the barrel of it beneath Philip's chin. "I reckon I wouldn't need much excuse, the way you lied about Merilee!"

Philip straightened. He saw Hugh meant it. He swore. "If it wasn't for her, you never would have—"

"Yes," Hugh said, "if it hadn't been for Merilee you might have gone on with your wild scheme a few months longer. A lot of people might have been killed without any need while you fought your private war of hate." He waved Philip to his feet. "The task the Confederacy wanted you to do wasn't important enough for your pride. When you were ordered home, you staged your own little rebellion and stayed here in California to dream of an empire. You wanted to fight both the North and South, didn't you, Ashton?"

Merilee helped Hugh tie them. He led them to the wagon as if he were leading a team of balky mules. Only, there wasn't much balk left in Philip. And Miguel never even grunted.

Hugh lifted Merilee to the front seat, sat beside her and took up the reins.

Merilee put her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Hugh." She shivered closer. "I was so afraid. And I knew what you were thinking about me. I—I couldn't stand it. I just had to do something."

"You did plenty."

Merilee touched her finger to the grin that teased his mouth. "What's that for?"

"I was just deciding what I'm going to get you for the house—after we're married." The grin went big again. "A white mouse, Merilee. I'll keep it in a cage as a pet and let it out when you don't behave."

"You're sure that's why you want it—to make me behave?"

"Well . . . ." He laughed softly and pulled her all the way into his arms. Hugh kissed her. It was the kind of a kiss that left nothing more for words to say.

THE END

THE KISSIN' OF A SHY 'UN

(Continued from page 42)

He led her out into the cool night air. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, she could make out the shapes of the deserted stores, the bars and dance-halls with their brightly gleaming windows and the cool stars high in the sky.

They walked along in silence. Roger matching his steps to hers, his shoulders hunched, his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

Mary Ellen broke the silence at last. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "Sorry about you and Tom. I didn't mean to come between you."

"I got mad," Roger said briefly. "Tom's all right. But he's mixed up about a lot of things."

She stopped in front of the boarding house. "This is where I live."

He didn't offer to say good night. He just stood there like he had something on his mind. Something he wanted to say and didn't know how to say.

"Mary Ellen," he said at length. "Sue told me this was the first time you'd ever been to a dancehall. All that talk was just lies, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was lies, Roger," she admitted fearfully. "Sue told me I wasn't to let anyone think I was green, that you wouldn't like me if I was green."

"Why wouldn't you kiss Tom?" he insisted.

"I couldn't!"

"You kissed me," he reminded her.

"That was different," she said quickly. She remembered the sweetness of his lips and tears blinded her eyes.

Roger put his arm around her and kissed her gently. "It was different for me, too."

All the enchantment and romance that she had longed for was in his lips.

"Were you really brought up on a ranch?" he asked tenderly.

"I really was."

They were both smiling now, not forced, artificial grins, but genuine smiles of happiness.

"You understand all about cow critters?"

"I do."

His arms tightened around her, holding her close, holding her as though he would

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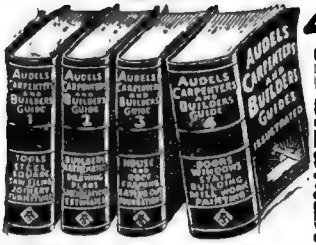

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never, never let her go. In his arms Mary Ellen knew, just as she had known at the dancehall when she fell in love with him, that there would never be anymore loneliness or heartache for her as long as Roger was there.

(Continued from page 60)

six grim-eyed men. And at their head was Jack McPherson.

"Drop your irons," he said. "We heard your whole story—from your own lips. Are you dropping those guns? I'll count to five. . . ."

The guns fell onto the dry ground.

When Fred Crittenden's ropes were cut, McPherson told two of his own men: "Herd them inside—Lyama with them. I'll take Mr. Farrell home and send the sheriff out to handle the rest."

"Dr. McPherson. . . . Jack—" Lyama said—"let me explain this dreadful thing. . . ."

"Explain to the sheriff."

As she turned, at gun-point, into the shack, Libbie brushed past her and stepped out into the sunlight, her head tilting as she looked up at McPherson.

"You didn't mention taking me home," she said. "May I go along?"

He dropped his gun into her holster and studied her with clear, silver-gray eyes. As she watched, the pupils turned to black flame.

"It can't be Crittenden," he said. "Even if you thought so for awhile, I'll make you forget him. You'll have to anyhow, after the law gets through. Libbie, he's not an army officer—not any longer. He was court-martialed a year ago and dismissed from service because of dishonesty."

"I don't care whether he's an officer, a crook or anything else. I never did, really. If you still love me, here I am."

The black flames in his eyes deepened, and he reached for her, took her slowly into his arms. His mouth found hers, and the sunlight darkened as veils of black fire spread over the world. And that same dark flame was stirring through her senses to answer the steady rhythm of the life-pulse in him.

THE END

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